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Dark Room

Prologue

Bleak. The man had never known it so bleak. He shuddered and with hands raw from the wind he pulled the flimsy coat closer to his body, but it was no protection against the cold. The wind had gone, but an icy front from the North had replaced it. He had heard it said that it was the harshest winter in forty years. He certainly recalled no other like it.

In the daytime he walked the city streets seeking warmth in shop doorways until the security guards began to look at him with suspicion. He was no thief. He would rather starve than steal, and he made it his business to move on before any false accusations could begin.

The shops were quiet after the bustle of the New Year sales. The Christmas lights hung unlit across the streets. There was something sad about the end of another year, but maybe this one would be different.

The man shivered, and turned down a side street where he might at least get shelter in a doorway. From a shop window light spilled into the narrow street. The man looked at the sign above the door - gold letters on peeling light blue paint that read Mrs Quinn's Charity Shop. He looked through the window. On a tall stool, a bespectacled woman in her sixties was sitting at the counter reading a newspaper. She looked up as he pushed the door open and he felt a rush of warmth from the electrical heater by the counter.

The woman greeted him.

'I'm looking for a coat,' he said. 'Something warm.'

She eyed him and got down from the stool. She went to a rail and he watched her push aside sweaters and shirts until she pulled out a hanger with a long navy blue coat.

'This is just in,' she said. 'Should be your size.'

The man tried it on. The woman pulled back a curtain to show him a full-length mirror. He looked at his reflection - at his unshaven face and unruly hair. It had been some time since he'd had a shave or a haircut. He turned away from the mirror.

'How much is it?' he asked.

'Ten euro,' the woman replied.

He took the change from his pockets and began to count it, embarrassed as he felt the woman's eyes upon him.

'I've only got seven,' he told her.

The woman nodded. 'I'll tell you what, give me your one and we'll make it five,' she said.

He looked at his tattered old coat on the rail where he'd thrown it. It wasn't worth five euro. It wasn't worth anything, but he nodded and handed the woman the fistful of change, grateful for her kindness.

Chapter One

Oliver Molloy woke abruptly and felt the urgent need to get out of the house. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed, he tried desperately to rid himself of the remnants of a particularly disturbing dream, but it refused to be obliterated, even after he'd turned on the dim overhead light. Sometimes his dreams were so realistic that he found himself searching the house to see if Mercedes had returned. He walked from room to room switching on lights, sometimes even going so far as to call his wife's name, but he knew that despite his compulsion to do such things, his thoughts were irrational. The only place that he would see Mercedes now was in that dark recess of his mind, and that thought disturbed him more than any dream.

It had been almost a month since he had seen her, a month since that awful night, but every time he closed his eyes she was there. He had begun to dread the night, the time when he was most susceptible to these visitations. He feared that soon he would sleep like a fish - eyes wide, such was the trepidation that these nocturnal episodes caused. Mercedes had become like a cataract, something he couldn't see past, and it was only daylight that could dispel her presence and allow him to breathe normally again.

Oliver pulled on his heavy winter coat and wound a scarf round his neck. The scarf caught on his unshaven jaw. He didn't care about his dishevelled appearance. It was unlikely that he would encounter anyone out walking in the hours before dawn. He eased the front door open. The street was quiet. A lone cat crossed the neighbours' garden and leapt onto the wall between them. It looked at him, eyes luminous in the semi-darkness, and then opened its mouth and let out a silent cry. When he didn't respond, it moved on.

Finally, a thaw had begun. For three weeks the city had been held captive to an unprecedented freeze. A layer of ice covered the canal still, but already it had thinned at the edges to reveal the murky water beneath. Oliver watched it trickle slowly from amongst the reeds, and heard the steady drip as the willows wept at the water's edge and stained the ice grey. Through his leather shoes the cold crept and he hurried his step to improve the circulation in both his hands and feet, which didn't bear the weather well. When he had reached the last lock before the main road, the point at which he normally turned back for home, the sky had begun to lighten.

He stepped onto the lock, crossed halfway and looked back along the canal in the direction of home. His head was clearer now, but still his dreams had not left him. In

the time that they had been together, he had never dreamt of Mercedes. Now, she wouldn't leave him alone, and every dream was an attack, a bitter recrimination. The dream from which he'd woken that morning had been the most disturbing yet. With one hand on her hip, she'd stood there, her body jutting forward as she told him that he was nothing without her. She had called him a fake, said that it wouldn't take long for people to see right through him. Then she'd pointed to him and laughed, and when he looked down his body was transparent. There was nothing but a watery outline that showed where it used to be. Inside was hollow, bereft of organs; he was nothing - just like she said he was.

He shuddered and this time it had nothing to do with the cold. He had to stop obsessing over Mercedes. The dreams were constructs of his own conscience; he knew that. No good would come of it. He walked down the opposite side of the lock and gazed into the water. There were no swans near the bridge where they usually gathered, waiting for the students from the nearby college to throw them crusts from leftover sandwiches. He supposed they'd return now that the thaw had come.

As he stood staring into the water, he became aware of something caught beyond the reeds. It looked like an old coat; something that may have been discarded before the freeze came. He stared harder, eyes straining in the half-light, and then he saw something shiny amongst the bulrushes. Gingerly, he stepped down the bank. The mud was frozen beneath his feet and he edged closer to the water, crouching as near as he dared to peer between the rushes. Where the ice had melted a man's hand rested above the water, the fingers blue-white. On the second finger a gold wedding band caught the first light.

Hastily, Oliver retreated from the water's edge. It occurred to him that he could go home and forget that he had ever seen the body beneath the ice. He didn't want to phone the Guards, didn't want to answer their questions. It was the kind of attention that he would rather avoid, but even as this thought went through his mind, he found himself dialling the number for emergency services. He could not ignore his civic duty, and so he waited with the dead man for help to arrive.

They took their time in coming. He guessed there was no hurry for a man whose life had already ended. He moved down the bank again and stared into the water. The body was face down, arms raised above the head, as though making a plea for help. The fingers had stiffened into position and looked as though they might snap, like dead wood, if he were to touch them. He wondered what had happened, if the

man had fallen into the icy water and had been unable to get out or if it had been planned. He couldn't fathom why anyone would do such a thing; there were easier ways to end it. Of course there was a third option, one that made him uneasy just waiting in the place where it may have happened. The man could have been murdered and his body dumped in the water. It wouldn't have been the first gangland killing in the area, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. It made him glad he'd opted to practise family rather than criminal law. The former had its share of malevolence, but as a rule it didn't involve bloodshed.

Finally, the Garda car turned over the bridge. It travelled slowly, lights off. Oliver walked to the edge of the road and raised a hand for their attention. He guessed that his black coat would not stand out against the grey morning light. The car pulled up and two men stepped out. The first was an overweight man in his fifties who walked with a surprisingly swift step. The other, a young officer, who looked like he could have been fresh out of Templemore training school, walked closely behind his superior.

'Mr Molloy? Superintendent Sweeney and Garda Regan. You reported a body in the water?'

Oliver nodded and gestured toward the canal. 'It's just beyond the rushes, trapped under the ice. You can see a hand above the surface.'

Oliver stepped back and the two Guards moved closer to the canal. The older man nodded like he'd seen it all before.

'We'll just take a statement from you if that's all right,' he said.

The young Garda asked Oliver questions as Sweeney stood looking into the distance beyond the bridge. A few minutes later, the sound of a motor drowned out Garda Regan's voice. Both he and Oliver turned to watch the dinghy that had appeared from beneath the bridge with a crew of three men on board. They cut the motor and let the Garda dinghy drift close to where the body was and Oliver watched, half concentrating on giving Regan his personal details, as the men broke the remaining ice and pulled the body from the water. They did it in such a way that Oliver didn't see the man's face, and the corpse, murky water flowing from his sodden coat, disappeared onto the surface of the boat.

'No I.D.,' one of the crew shouted across to Sweeney. 'But there's a business card in the coat pocket – Vincent Arnold, it says. We'll run a check from the station, see if it matches any missing persons reports.'

‘Good enough.’ Sweeney nodded.

It. Oliver wondered whether *it* referred to the body or the business card. Did such exposure render you indifferent to death? He’d once heard an undertaker use such a term and had been appalled by the callousness of the word. Death was a business, something that had to be dealt with, cleared away. An image of Mercedes appeared in his mind; her body limp in his arms, as he’d held her for the last time. He’d been surprised at how quickly she’d grown cold, at the suddenness with which her skin had taken on the waxen appearance of death. He tried to shake such images from his mind as he became aware of Sweeney’s narrowed blue eyes upon him. He shifted and gestured towards the canal.

‘I suppose you see this kind of thing all the time,’ he said.

Sweeney shrugged and squinted at the morning light.

‘Tell me, do you usually go out walking this early in the morning, Mr Molloy?’ he asked.

Oliver returned his gaze. ‘Only when I can’t sleep,’ he said.

Sweeney nodded, and heaved his bulk into the passenger seat of the car, where Regan was already waiting. The dinghy had moved off, cut a swathe through the thin ice and revealed the murky depths of the canal. Oliver turned in the direction of home. The Garda car passed him and he raised a hand, but neither Sweeney nor the young driver acknowledged him. He dug his hands deeper in his coat pockets, quickened his step against the cold, and found himself hoping that he wouldn’t have reason to encounter either Sweeney or his colleague again.

Chapter Two

Joanna sat on the floor surrounded by photographs and eyed each one critically. The college exhibition was to take place in a month's time, but she had been working on the collection all semester and she felt that she had taken enough shots to put together an impressive composition. The collection consisted of a series of black and white shots that depicted brides in various guises. Joanna had picked up a wedding dress in a second-hand shop. She liked the slightly worn look of it, the way the lace trimming had frayed at the edges. She had wondered as she fingered the silk who had owned it, and why she'd decided to give the dress to a charity shop.

The brides stared up at her as she arranged and discarded the pictures. She picked up her favourite, an angular shot of a young woman in a bridal dress sitting on the window ledge of an empty room. The girl's reflection had been caught in the glass and her wistful expression had been captured perfectly in the lens. Beneath the window, a battered suitcase stood anticipating the girl's departure.

Joanna stood back and directed the head of the halogen lamp over the pictures scattered on the living room floor. There was a bride running down the street, her hair falling loose and her bouquet to the fore of the picture lying in a puddle on the ground. Another showed a bride walking in a narrow street with the battered suitcase. Her back was to the camera and she held her dress up with one hand to reveal a pair of Doc Martin boots on her feet as she walked the street slick with rain.

Joanna smiled. The girl in the photo was a good friend, and they had had some fun during the shoot. The girl hadn't modelled before, but her pale skin and slight frame had been exactly what Joanna had been looking for in a subject and she had finally persuaded her to do it. Joanna was just placing this photo next to the first when there was a knock at the door. She looked at the clock on the mantle-piece, which confirmed her suspicions. It was after eleven o' clock, too late for any caller. She turned out the halogen light, which she hoped had not been visible through the thick curtains, and made her way stealthily towards the window. Through a chink in the curtains, she stared out into darkness. There was a car outside the gate, its lights shone down the darkened street and she could hear the steady purr of the engine, but she couldn't see anyone, and just as she was beginning to wonder if she'd imagined it, the knocking sounded once more. Joanna pulled closed the gap in the curtains and wondered whether to answer it or not.

She crossed the room, eased the door open and stepped into the hall. She listened for any sound upstairs, but heard none. The knocking had not woken her mother. The security light had come on in the porch. Whoever it was had stepped in out of the cold. Joanna pressed her eye to the spy-hole, which was filled by a close-up image of a more than middle-aged woman. She wasn't anyone that Joanna had seen before, and she wondered as the woman raised the knocker for a third time, if she had the wrong house. Exercising caution, she decided to find out.

'Who is it?' Joanna called, her mouth close to the door.

She watched as the woman at the other side paused, looking directly at the spy hole, as though she too could see through to the glass, and finally spoke.

'Angela?' she said.

On hearing her mother's name, Joanna decided that the woman was no threat. She removed the chain and opened the door, so that they were standing opposite one another. Joanna gauged that the woman was about her mother's age. She was quite tall, and held herself in an almost regal manner.

'I'm looking for Angela. This is Angela Lacey's house?'

'Yes, but I'm afraid my mother's not here. Can I help you?'

The woman hesitated; clutching her handbag in one hand while the other remained in the pocket of her camel-coloured coat.

'Do you know when your mother will return? I'm afraid I've got some bad news. I must speak to her...I know it's late but...'

'I'm sorry, but are you a friend of my mother?'

The woman smiled a strange smile.

'A friend, no...I wouldn't say that. Your mother knows...well she knew...my husband.'

The woman's sentence trailed off. She turned and glanced at the car outside the gate. The engine was still running. There was a figure in the driver's seat, but it was too dark to see whether it was a man or woman. When the woman turned to Joanna again, her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

'Look, would you like to come in? My mother's in bed, but I can wake her.'

Joanna stepped back and the woman entered the warmth of the hall. Joanna showed her into the living room where her photographs were scattered on the floor. She saw the woman's eyes dart around the room, taking everything in. They rested on the photos.

‘What’s your name?’ Joanna asked.

‘Rachel. Rachel Arnold. You can tell your mother it’s about Vince.’ The woman was busy plucking off one suede glove as she spoke.

Joanna nodded and told her to sit down.

As she climbed the stairs Joanna wondered who the man called Vince was, and what his possible connection to her mother could be. When she’d reached the top of the stairs she turned on the light in the landing, and then eased open the door to her mother’s room. It was in darkness and she could hear her mother breathing heavily in sleep.

‘Mam.’

Gently she touched her shoulder. Her mother stirred and Joanna whispered to her again, louder this time.

‘What? What is it?’ her mother said, partially sitting up.

Her voice was thick with sleep.

‘There’s a woman downstairs. She says she needs to talk to you about somebody called Vince?’

Joanna’s mother sat up suddenly and pushed the duvet from her.

‘Vince?’

‘Yes, her name’s Rachel something. She’s waiting in the living room. Do you know her?’

Her mother ran a hand through her hair. ‘What time is it?’ she said.

‘About half past ten...I didn’t know whether to answer or not...it’s so late and...do you know someone called Vince?’

Her mother stood in the middle of the room and cast about her. She picked up a blouse from the back of the bedroom chair, and then put it down again. Joanna took her dressing gown from a hook on the bedroom door.

‘Here put this on,’ she said.

Her mother slipped into the dressing gown, and tightened the belt. She sat on the edge of the bed and stuck her feet in her slippers.

‘She’s in the living room?’

‘Yes. I had to invite her in. She looked kind of upset...and I couldn’t leave her on the doorstep...not like that.’

Her mother nodded, took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair again to flatten it. Joanna followed her from the room. Her mother paused at the top of the stairs, and she almost walked into her.

‘Look, maybe you should stay here,’ her mother said.

Joanna hesitated. ‘Will you be all right? I mean...who is that woman? Why would she call so late?’

‘Just someone from the past...please, wait in your room, Joanna. I’ll explain everything later.’

Joanna nodded, but her mother didn’t look at her. With one hand on the banister and the other lifting the end of her robe she hurried down the stairs.

‘Rachel, what brings you here?’ she said.

The door closed and Joanna didn’t hear the woman’s reply. She crept down the steps of the stairs. Her mother didn’t want her to hear their conversation, but her curiosity was too much for her to obey such a request. She settled herself as far down the stairs as she dared. If she heard movement within the room, she would withdraw as quickly as she could; make it look as though she were descending at that moment.

‘It’s about Vince. He’s dead,’ the woman said.

This abrupt statement was followed by a moment of silence in which Joanna strained to hear her mother’s reply.

‘What...what do you mean? What happened?’

‘He was missing for three weeks. Nobody knew where he was and then this morning the Guards came. They found him in the canal, trapped under the ice. Some man out walking saw him.’

The woman’s voice wavered. Joanna moved down the stairs until she was almost in the hallway.

‘I don’t believe it.’

Her mother’s voice was soft. She heard the woman stifle a sob.

‘Well, it’s true. He’s gone,’ she said.

‘What happened? Did he fall in? Why didn’t you call someone when he didn’t come home? Three weeks, you said. He was missing for three weeks?’

‘Of course I did. I called the Guards...there was an investigation...and then this morning...this morning they...oh god, it’s all so unreal...’

The woman broke down. Joanna listened, but she heard no comforting words offered by her mother. A few minutes later, the woman spoke again.

‘That’s...that’s her isn’t it. That’s...’

‘Joanna, yes. My daughter.

Her mother’s voice had hardened.

‘Why have you come here, Rachel?’ she said.

‘Because I thought you should know...because of her...it seems like the right thing, doesn’t it? I mean now that...’

‘Now that he’s gone? No, I don’t think it does. She need never have known, but you’ve decided to see to that, haven’t you? I think that’s why you’ve come here...to cause trouble...some kind of revenge, now that you don’t have Vince to stop you. My God...have you been saving it up all these years?’

Joanna descended the last few steps of the stairs. She had never heard her mother so angry. She wanted to intervene, to know who the woman was, and why the death of this man should concern her. She stood in the hallway and stared at the living room door, reluctant yet willing herself to open it.

‘How could this possibly be revenge?’ Rachel Arnold said. ‘He’s dead, Angela. Don’t you get it? But yes, there is a reason why I’ve come. And it’s not just to tell you that Vince is dead...it’s for my own sake...something I need to know...’

There was a pause.

‘Did you see Vince? Before this happened, did he come here?’

‘Vince? Come here? He knew better than that. Why would you think such a thing?’

Joanna could hear curiosity now in her mother’s voice. Rachel Arnold sounded desperate. She had come looking for answers.

‘I don’t know. I thought that maybe he’d come here. He mentioned you. He hadn’t mentioned you in years...it seemed odd.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Oh, nothing really...’

Joanna could hear need creeping into her mother’s voice. She stared at the wall in front of her, at the same blue wallpaper that had been there since she was a child. She used to sit on the stairs and conjure pictures from the shapes in the pattern. Now as she stared ahead and listened to the voices in the other room, she sensed that everything she had ever known was about to change.

‘Tell me Rachel. I want to know. What did Vince say about me?’

‘He said that it was wrong...what he did to you.’

There was silence for a few minutes. Joanna wondered what they were doing, her mother and the woman. Were they carefully avoiding each other's eyes? Was the woman wishing she'd never come?

'What's this?' she heard the woman ask.

'They're Joanna's. She studies photography. She's putting a collection together for an exhibition.'

'They're good, very good. Did you encourage her?'

'No. Funny, isn't it? Must be in the blood.'

'Will you tell her?' the woman said.

'I don't have much choice now, do I? If I know Joanna, she's probably already heard half the conversation.'

Joanna moved back from the door, and furtively made her way up the stairs. She was trying to understand what she'd heard. She had a feeling that she knew who Vince might have been, but she needed to hear her mother say it. She sat on the top step of the stairs and waited to hear the living room door open. She wanted to listen to the rest of the conversation, but she didn't dare. It was unlikely that the two women had much more to discuss now that the woman had said what she'd come to say.

When the door eventually did open, Joanna withdrew into the shadows of the landing. Her mother spoke in a low voice as the woman stepped into the cold night.

'I'm sure you wish I hadn't come,' the woman said.

'Too late for that now, isn't it?'

'He's being released tomorrow...I'm bringing him back to the house. The funeral's on Tuesday if you want to tell her...I don't expect you to come.'

'No, I'm sure you'd rather I didn't.'

The woman said nothing to deny it, and the next sound Joanna heard was the sound of the woman's shoes on the tarmac before her mother closed the front door. Joanna waited for her to call her, to say something, to explain, but there was silence from downstairs and when she looked down through the banisters, the hall was empty.

Slowly, she descended the stairs. Her mother was sitting in her armchair in the living room with her head in her hands.

'Are you all right, Mam?' Joanna said.

Her mother shook her head and looked at her hands clasped in front of her.

'How did you know this Vince then?'

She waited for her mother to answer. Her mother cupped her hands to her mouth, and exhaled a breath that she must have been holding, it hissed through her fingers, and a sound like a sob broke from her throat.

‘He was your father.’ she said.

‘My father. But you said he was dead.’

Joanna had difficulty getting the words past her lips. Her mother avoided looking at her.

‘At the time I wished he was, believe me.’

Joanna’s mother stood up. She started to cry. She said something that sounded like “and now he is”, but Joanna wasn’t sure because her mother had turned and begun to walk away from her.

‘You mean you’ve lied to me all this time. I don’t get it...how could you do such a thing? Why?’

Her mother was crying harder now. She walked into the hall and Joanna followed her.

‘I’m sorry. I can’t do this, Joanna. Please, I’ll tell you everything, but not now. I need to be alone...I just can’t...’

‘Who was that woman?’ Joanna said.

‘His wife.’

Her mother continued up the stairs and Joanna heard the sound of her bedroom door closing, and the lock being turned. She considered following, but she knew that to persist would do no good. She went upstairs and stopped outside her mother’s door. Inside, she could hear her crying. She wanted to console her, to ask her if she was okay, but she was too angry. She sat on the top step of the stairs and tried to absorb what she’d been told, or rather what she’d overheard. She had believed that her father was dead and he hadn’t been, but now he was and she would never meet him. She wanted to know who Vince Arnold was and why her mother had kept his identity from her.

Chapter Three

Oliver picked up one of his wife's blouses and folded it carefully before tossing it in a cardboard box on the floor. He had taken all of Mercedes's clothes from the wardrobe and they were strewn in a pile across the bed, and in the boxes that lay scattered at his feet. He picked up a sweater and held it to his face. It smelt of Mercedes's perfume – a rich, woody fragrance that had seemed always to linger in the room long after she'd left it. It was that scent as much as the sight of Mercedes's clothes that evoked, unbidden, the memories that tormented him. He put the sweater in an almost full box, secured the flaps with brown tape, and trapped the scent of his wife inside.

That morning when he had opened the wardrobe to take out a clean shirt he was accosted, as he had been every morning for the past three weeks, by the sight of Mercedes's clothes. He had decided at that moment that the only way for him to move on was to rid the house of any sign of her. Immediately after breakfast, he drove to the local supermarket and asked a boy on the shop floor for boxes into which he could pack her things. Apart from her clothes, which he would donate to a charity shop, Mercedes had had few possessions. There was a music box that had belonged to her grandmother, and a collection of porcelain dolls that she'd had since she was a child. Both things had been of sentimental value to her and because of this he didn't have the heart to pack them away with the rest, and so he left them where they had always been on a shelf in the living room.

Oliver was standing amidst the boxes going through Mercedes's clothes when the phone rang. He clambered across the boxes to reach it, and then seeing the international number on the display screen let it ring out until the answering machine clicked in. His heart beat wildly as he heard the voice at the other end, that husky Spanish accent, which had fascinated him so much in the beginning, and if he were completely honest with himself, still did.

'Mercedes, it's me. I've been calling and calling. Please call me back and let me know that everything's okay. I can't stop thinking about you. I know you probably don't want to speak to me right now, but we can resolve this...I know it. Please, call me to let me know that you're all right...'

There was a pause as Carmen Hernandez considered what to say next, and clearly deciding that there was nothing else she could say that would make any difference to her sister, she hung up, leaving Oliver staring at the machine. He'd lost count of the

number of messages Carmen had left. Sometimes, she phoned and hung up before the machine had kicked in. He wondered how long more he could avoid her. He expected her to call his office any day. She had already tried his mobile, but he hadn't answered. He suspected that she wanted to speak to Mercedes before she spoke to him. It must have been killing her not knowing what the result of the bomb she had dropped on her sister had been.

Eventually, he suspected that she would turn up looking for answers. Carmen was not the type to shy away from any situation. She would pay no heed to the fact that she had been the instigator – that she had been responsible for everything. He didn't trust himself to meet her. What she had done was stupid, unforgivable, and he didn't know what he might do to her if they met. If it hadn't been for Carmen, that horrible night would never have happened. He and Mercedes may have grown slowly apart as so many couples did, but it would not have ended like it had. He would never forgive Carmen for that.

He pressed the button on the machine and erased Carmen's message. Then he looked at Mercedes's clothes lying on the bed, and decided that it would be better to leave some of her things hanging in the wardrobe. If Carmen did arrive unannounced he would have some explaining to do if everything that belonged to her sister had vanished. It was unlikely that Mercedes would have taken everything with her so fast if she had moved out.

Oliver picked up a silk skirt, and as he did so he imagined the cool swish of it against Mercedes's tanned and shapely legs. She had worn that skirt to a wedding they'd attended in Barcelona just months after they'd met. He remembered slipping his hands beneath it later that night on a beach lit only by the lights of the fishermen lined up along the shore. Her legs were bare and he had run his hands along her silky thighs and pulled her to him as the fishermen, oblivious to the lovers, stared out at the black sea and waited for the fish to bite.

Oliver's hands were shaking as he hung the skirt in the wardrobe. He hadn't allowed himself to think of his wife like that for a long time. He had resented their lack of physical contact – a sex life that seemed to have petered out before it had run its natural course. Things had been strained between them, long before Carmen had said anything. He tried to justify his actions by blaming Mercedes. If she hadn't become so cold, so indifferent would any of it have happened?

He spent the next hour sorting through his wife's things – re-hanging some of them in their shared wardrobe, and packing the others away in cardboard boxes. By lunchtime, he had finished. He took the boxes and loaded them into the boot of the car. He wondered if any of the neighbours were watching - prying eyes peering from behind lace curtains. He was thankful that neither he nor Mercedes had struck up any friendships with their neighbours. They were private, passed themselves off with a “hello” or a “nice day”, but that was as far as their contact had gone. Generally, he liked to avoid people who asked too many questions about his private life, and Mercedes had shared that feeling.

It was freezing. Oliver slammed the boot closed, and then scraped the ice off the windscreen of the car. He felt rather low as he drove into the city to unburden himself of Mercedes's clothes, but he knew that it was the only way forward. Mercedes was gone, and his problem was far from over. There was Carmen to deal with. Not to mention the rest of Mercedes's family. Soon, people would begin to ask questions and he had better have his answers ready.

The shop was small and had a sign over it that read *Mrs Quinn's Charity Shop*. Oliver pushed open the green door with his shoulder and held it with his foot as he manoeuvred through the narrow space with the cardboard box in his arms. A buzzer rang as soon as he had opened the door and the middle-aged woman behind the counter looked up from the magazine that she was reading.

‘Hello,’ she said. She closed the magazine and climbed down from the tall stool she was sitting on. ‘A cold one, isn't it?’

‘It's fairly nasty out there all right.’

He put the box down on the counter in front of her.

‘Are you taking anything in at the moment?’ he asked.

‘Absolutely,’ she said. ‘We're crying out for stuff. Everything sells out over the Christmas.’

He nodded.

The woman opened the box and took out one of Mercedes's blouses and held it up to the light. Then she laid it on the counter and began to rummage through the box, taking things out to inspect them.

‘This is nice stuff. Are you sure she wants to get rid of it?’ she asked.

Oliver paused before he answered.

‘My wife...she died. I don't know anyone else that might want them,’ he said.

The woman put down the skirt she was examining.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ she said, her eyes narrowing in sympathy. There were deep lines etched at the sides of her mouth. She moved her hand as if to reach out to him and then didn’t.

Oliver nodded, and tried to block out Mercedes’s voice in his head. *Liar.*

‘Cancer, was it?’ the woman asked, as though it were the only death possible.

‘No. She was killed – a road accident.’

The woman shook her head. ‘There’s nothing but maniacs on the road,’ she said.

Oliver nodded and indicated towards the clothes strewn on the counter. ‘I’ve some more boxes in the car,’ he told her.

The woman smiled. She didn’t ask him anything else about his wife and he left her sorting through Mercedes’s things, fingering the cloth, searching for any imperfections. He felt a strange sort of emptiness as he watched her examining the things that Mercedes had worn. That she would never wear again. He hadn’t expected to feel that way, as though there were a void somewhere inside him. He opened the boot of the car and leant in to take out another box. He hadn’t taped one of them and the contents were spilling out into the boot where it had toppled over.

He was shoving the clothes back into the box when he heard someone calling his name.

‘Oliver. Oliver Molloy, is that you?’

He looked up. There was a woman hurrying across the street. He didn’t recognise her at first. He stood there, at the open boot, trying to figure out who she was.

‘It is you,’ she said, as she got closer. ‘My God, it’s been such a long time!’

Finally he recognised her. She was an old friend of Mercedes, someone she used to work with.

‘Adrienne, my God it *has* been a long time. It must be what...three...four years? How are you doing?’ He slammed the boot closed, and Adrienne extended her hand and shook his warmly.

‘I know, it’s hard to believe...I’m great...And you? How’s Mercedes doing? I can’t believe it’s so long since I saw you both.’

‘Yes, she’s fine. We’re both good...’ he said. ‘What are you doing these days? Are you still at ABC?’

Adrienne laughed, a tinkling kind of laugh that reminded him of the C note on a piano.

‘No, I left soon after Mercedes did. You probably don’t remember, but I was studying acting at the time...well, I’ve been trying to make a go of it. It’s difficult of course, no money in it, but I get a bit of work doing ads and stuff...’

‘Really...wow...an actress.’

Adrienne smiled and he smiled back. She had a very pretty mouth, there was a dimple at one corner and her lips were coated in a shiny pink lip-gloss. He had no doubt that this girl would get parts.

‘It’s so good to run into you like this. Mercedes and I should never have lost touch...we used to have such laughs. I must get your number, maybe we can arrange to meet up like we used to...’

Adrienne began searching in her bag, and took out a mobile phone.

He gave her the house number, and then gave her Mercedes’s mobile number.

‘You won’t be able to get her at the moment. She’s away in Barcelona. Her father’s not so well,’ he said.

‘Oh, I’m really sorry to hear that. I’ll give it a few weeks then...hopefully, everything will be okay.’

Oliver looked down at her coppery hair as she concentrated on the phone. She looked up suddenly and there was a moment of awkwardness. He had always thought she was attractive. He wondered suddenly if she’d married that guy that she used to bring to dinner with them, and he decided to ask her.

‘What ever happened to that guy, did you?’

Adrienne started laughing. ‘Norman? My God, I haven’t thought of him in a long time...’

Oliver laughed. ‘I could never see what you were doing with that guy.’

Adrienne looked away. ‘Yeah, well, I didn’t know either in the end.’

‘And now, is there someone special?’

‘No. I’m just concentrating on my acting...trying to make it work, you know.’

She smiled at him.

‘I’m really glad I saw you. I’d better go, but please tell Mercedes I was asking about her and that I’ll call her soon.’

‘I will. It was great to see you.’

He leaned down and kissed her cheek and her face turned a shade of pink to match her lips and he wondered if he’d been right all those years ago when he’d suspected she’d had a thing for him, and if he should have taken advantage of it.

He watched her run across the road and get into a silver Renault Clio. She waved to him as she passed. He waved back and made as if he were searching for something in the glove compartment. When he was sure she was out of sight, he got out of the car again and brought the rest of Mercedes's things into the shop.

The woman had by now gone back to her magazine. She looked up again as he entered. She must've taken his disappearance as a sign that he'd been upset and had needed time to pull himself together because she looked at him with pity.

'It's a difficult thing having to get rid of someone's belongings,' she said. 'I remember when my husband died I couldn't bring myself to clean out his wardrobe. I'd take out a shirt and I could smell him off it. It was like he was there in the room with me. But you have to move on. She wouldn't want you mourning.'

Oliver nodded, solemnly.

'No, she wouldn't,' he said. 'She was full of life. That was the thing I loved most about her - her energy'

He left the shop feeling strangely bereft. He got into the car and drove slowly away feeling as though he'd left something behind. He thought of Adrienne. Maybe he should've told her that Mercedes had left him. It would have aroused her sympathy and maybe they'd have acted on that spark from the past. He hated to go home to an empty house. It was lonely in the evenings, and he needed a distraction, someone to keep the ghosts away.

Chapter Four

Joanna heard her mother crying intermittently throughout the night. She had got out of bed at one point and tapped gently at her mother's door. The crying had stopped, but when she tried the handle, the door was locked, and she had returned to bed to stare at the ceiling and wonder about the man called Vince Arnold.

The depth of her mother's grief surprised her. She said that she had wished him dead, but it was clear from her reaction that was not the truth. You don't cry for those you hate – the most you feel is a pang of guilt for the satisfaction you feel in the knowledge that you will never have to hear from or see that person again.

At some point in the night, Joanna must have fallen into a slumber, too exhausted to think, because in the morning when she woke it was light. She groped for her mobile phone on the bedside locker and found that it was after ten o' clock. Surprised that she had slept so soundly, she hurried out of bed. There was no sound now from her mother's room and she eased open her bedroom door and stepped into the landing. Her mother's door was open. Light filled the room through the open curtains and the bed was neatly made. She must have risen early. Joanna wondered if she'd slept at all.

Tentatively, Joanna descended the stairs. Last night's episode seemed like some nightmare, but she knew that it was not, that today was the day that she would find out about her father. The house was silent. She expected to find her mother sitting quietly in her armchair staring into space, but when she entered the living room her mother's chair was empty. Joanna looked round for a note, but there was none. Perhaps her mother had gone for a walk to organise her thoughts. She went back upstairs and dressed and was somewhat relieved that she didn't have to face straight away whatever it was her mother had to say.

She ate breakfast, surprised that she had an appetite. When she felt the kettle, it was cold. Her mother had either left a long time before or in her rush to get out of the house she hadn't made her usual morning coffee. At the kitchen table Joanna sat and stared out at the frozen earth. She wondered how her mother knew Rachel Arnold, Vince's wife, and whether their marriage had something to do with her mother's bitterness towards him. Had he chosen the woman, Rachel over her? Was it a case of rivalry between the two women, but Joanna's mother had been pregnant, so it seemed that she was the one with the claim on Vince. He must have been having an affair with the woman whilst her mother was pregnant. She wondered that Rachel Arnold

had the nerve to come to the house even if it had been years since their betrayal of her mother.

Her poor mother, it was no wonder she had been so upset. She must have loved Vince Arnold, had probably intended marrying him until she'd discovered that he'd been cheating on her. And now the Arnold woman turned up to tell her that he was dead, and for what, so that she would share her suffering? Joanna drained her mug of coffee and stood up. She was impatient now to talk to her mother. She wanted to know what had happened, whether the version she had imagined had been the truth. It made sense. Her mother wouldn't have wanted Vince Arnold to have anything to do with his child after that, but...who was he, really, her father?'

Joanna walked into the hall. She opened the door and felt the bite of the icy air. The street was deserted. There was no sign of her mother and she shivered and went back inside to await her return. On the living room floor, her photos were scattered. She had not tidied them away before going to bed, and she stood looking down at them, wondering if she could concentrate on preparing for the exhibition until her mother arrived. As she picked up a photo to examine it, she remembered that Rachel Arnold had made some comment about her interest in photography, and her mother had said that it must be in the blood. That could only mean one thing, Vince Arnold had either been a photographer or he'd had a keen interest in it. She left her photos and turned on her computer, she would try to find out all she could about her father.

Joanna sat down at the laptop and typed Vince Arnold's name into a search engine. A number of sites ran down the screen. There was the manager of an I.T. firm in Texas whose name was Vincent Arnold. There was a professor in the History department at an American-based University with the same name. But there was only one Vince Arnold that could have been her father, and Joanna stared hard at the photograph of the smiling Irish man and sought any similarity to her self. It wasn't difficult to locate him. Many of the newspapers ran with the death of the eminent sports journalist, Vince Arnold. Each one had the same photo of him smiling into the camera. His hair was thinning on top. He had a wide smile and there were laughter lines around his eyes and mouth as he squinted into the sun. It looked like the picture had been taken at some kind of racetrack. There were many people in the background. He wore a white shirt open at the neck, and a sports jacket, open, too. And though the photograph only showed him from the chest up, he looked like a big man who had probably been handsome in his youth.

Joanna wondered if his eyes were green like hers, and if his hair had been auburn. Although she bore a resemblance to her mother, their colouring was different. Her mother had blue eyes and her hair was a dirty blonde that she now highlighted with ashen streaks. Joanna stared hard at the black and white photo of her father and recognised his smile as her own. He was her father all right. Of that there was no mistake.

She read the short article next to the picture. It said that Vince Arnold, Sports journalist had died tragically at the age of fifty-two. It went on to say that Arnold had written for the Irish Times and the Irish Press and had won sportswriter of the year four times during his career. He not only wrote, but had also published sports photographs, which had appeared in newspapers, magazines, and even on Irish stamps. He was survived, it said, by his widow, Rachel Arnold. Joanna read other articles, which gave much the same information about her father. He was pictured with famous horse-trainers, and G.A.A. players. In each picture, he was wearing a white open-necked shirt and had a wide smile.

She found his name in the obituaries column. He would repose at Patrick Massey's Funeral home, Emmet Road, Inchicore that evening, followed by removal to the Oblitt's Church. She was surprised by the location. It hadn't occurred to her that he had lived only a couple of miles away. She wondered if they'd ever passed each other in the street, strangers. Had he looked at her and felt something, a familial connection, and then dismissed it as fantasy, or had he known who she was, but refused to acknowledge it – simply passed her in the street with not so much as a nod of the head or the hint of a smile that strangers often bestowed on each other?

She sighed and typed in 'Vincent Arnold' and her own name, but nothing came up. In the public sphere Vincent Arnold didn't have a daughter, no more than she had had a father. She shut down the computer, looked at the clock and wondered when her mother would return.

Chapter Five

Oliver leaned forward at his desk and tried to focus on what the woman was saying. Her mouth was moving, but he couldn't concentrate on the words that were coming out, instead he was hearing fragmented bits of speech floating on the air thick between them. The woman sat back and crossed her black-stockings'd legs. The action caused him to shift his gaze momentarily from her face. She was not beautiful, but she gave the impression of a woman convinced by her own attributes. Her small face framed by a thatch of dark hair was too pointed at the chin, and her narrowed blue eyes gave her the look of a small, but fierce animal. It was her full lips, startlingly red against her pale skin that captured his attention. And there was something else, too, something that despite their physical dissimilarities reminded him of Mercedes. He couldn't quite figure what it was, but it bothered him.

'So, what are my entitlements? I'm still his wife, so that must mean I'm entitled to half of this new house despite the separation? I mean, I'm not the one that walked out on the marriage.'

If he hadn't been feeling so ill, he may have commented on that. The fact that this woman had had an affair with her husband's friend, a lover that from what he gathered had long since departed the scene, seemed to escape her memory.

Oliver pulled at his tie. She was staring at him, waiting for an answer, but the air in the room seemed to have evaporated and a nauseous feeling was rising from the pit of his stomach. Something in the atmosphere, maybe the woman's perfume seemed to exacerbate it, and when he looked again at her expectant face, he found that it was partially obscured by splotches of yellow light.

'I'm sorry, but could you excuse me for a moment?' he said.

He felt rather than saw her eyes follow him from the room.

In the men's room the nauseous feeling overcame him and he leaned on the sink with both hands and retched acid-tasting bile. Perspiration broke out on his forehead, and he loosened the knot of his tie and tried to breathe, but he couldn't calm the frantic beating of his heart. The woman who sat in his office was nothing like Mercedes. And yet in every woman that he'd met since that terrible night he had seen something to remind him of her. It would have to stop.

He examined his face in the mirror. Beneath the fluorescent light his skin was opaque and the dark circles beneath his eyes screamed of his sleepless nights. He turned on the cold tap, cupped his hands and doused his face several times in icy

water. Eventually his heart resumed its regular beat, but his legs felt weak and he couldn't still the trembling in his hands. It was the panic that he felt in his dreams, but in daylight it was far more frightening.

To distract himself, he thought of the woman that sat in his office awaiting his return. It was a divorce case that he'd been working on for the past year. She was the sort of woman that he despised, intent on taking her husband for everything she could get, but he couldn't afford not to represent her. Business had been slow and it was an easy case to win.

He took a deep breath, grabbed a bunch of paper towels from the dispenser and blotted his face dry. The woman was his last client of the day. He would simply have to get through it.

'I'm sorry about that. Haven't been feeling very well all day,' he said. His legs were still shaking as he sat back down in his leather chair. The woman leaned forward at his desk.

'So,' she said. 'What are my rights here?'

If it was sympathy he'd been after, he'd miscalculated. The woman, who seemed to have forgotten that it was her infidelity that had instigated her husband's divorce proceedings, was interested only in money. It pained him that the law, albeit to his advantage, was on this woman's side. He gave her a long, silent look in which he hoped his distaste was evident and then, putting his personal feelings aside, forced himself to enter legal mode.

When the woman had left, he closed and locked the door behind her. His partner, who worked in an adjoining office, had gone to the courts and wouldn't return that evening. He sat at his desk and prepared to get to work on some documents that he needed to complete for a client. He didn't feel like working, but it was a distraction from his thoughts and he became absorbed in the work until the telephone rang and disturbed him.

'Good evening, Molloy and Byrne solicitors,' he said.

At the other end of the line there was silence.

He looked at the display on the phone, but the caller I.D. did not appear.

'Hello.'

The line crackled, but there was no reply.

He waited for a moment, the receiver held tightly to his ear before he hung up. As soon as he'd put the phone down, it rang again. He snatched up the receiver.

‘Molloy and Byrne Solicitors, good evening.’

A pause.

‘Who is this?’ he said.

He could hear shallow breathing at the other end of the line. It was barely audible, but definitely present.

‘Mercedes?’

The sick sensation rose in his stomach again as he whispered her name. There was a crackle at the other end of the line, and then he heard a voice.

‘Hello, is that Oliver Molloy?’

The voice was staccato, cutting out in parts. The accent was neutral and most certainly Irish.

‘Yes, this is Oliver speaking,’ he said.

There was a pause, followed by more crackling and then the line came clear.

‘Ah, Mr Molloy. My name is Rachel Arnold. I got your number from the guards. They told me that you were the one...the one that discovered my husband’s body.’

‘I’m sorry Mrs?’

‘Arnold. Rachel Arnold. I hope you don’t mind my calling. I just...’

‘Mrs Arnold. No, no, I’m very sorry for your trouble. What can I do for you?’

His heart was still beating rapidly as he listened to the woman speak.

‘I just...I wanted you to know my husband’s removal mass is on tomorrow evening and it...it would mean a lot to me if you could come. I’d like to speak to you. You’re not under any obligation of course, I’ll understand if you don’t want to.’

‘No, no, absolutely. I’d like to pay my respects...which church is it?’

The woman told him the name of the church and he grabbed a pen and scribbled it on the notepad before him.

‘And what was your husband’s name?’ he asked.

‘It was Vince. Vince Arnold.’

He scribbled the name on the pad. It sounded familiar to him, but he didn’t know why. He wondered if he’d ever represented him in a case.

‘Thank you, Mr Molloy. I hope you don’t mind my contacting you, but like I said, it would mean a lot...there are questions I’d like to ask you...things that maybe...’

The woman’s voice trailed off and the line crackled once more.

‘Not at all, like I said I really am sorry, if there’s anything that I can tell you that might help...’

Rachel Arnold thanked him and said that she would talk to him after the mass if he didn't mind sparing the time.

Oliver put the phone down and looked at the paperwork before him. He didn't think he'd be able to concentrate and so he filed the documents away and prepared to leave for the night. As he picked up his briefcase and the newspaper, which had sat unread on his desk since that morning, he discovered why the name Vince Arnold had seemed so familiar to him. The paper led with the headline "Tragic journalist found dead." Oliver unfolded the paper and read how a passer-by had come across the body of well-known sports journalist Vince Arnold in the Grand Canal the previous morning. There was a photo inset, and he saw for the first time the face of the drowned man. He was smiling into the camera, a healthy looking man in his early fifties. Oliver wondered again what had happened to him. The newspaper didn't suggest foul play. And he wondered if he had simply been a victim of the icy weather or if he had had reason to end his life. Rachel Arnold had questions, of that he had no doubt, but he didn't think that there was anything he could tell her to dispel the doubts that must have crept into her mind.

He folded the newspaper, slipped it into his briefcase and turned off his desk lamp. Before he left the office, he picked up the phone and listened to the dull hum of the dial tone. It crackled once before he put it down. Illuminated by a single street lamp outside, the office was an eerie place to be at night. He locked his office door and hurried through the reception area, pausing only to set the alarm, and it was with relief that he stepped out into the icy street and the noise of the city in rush hour that helped him to breathe again.

Chapter Six

Joanna parked in a darkened corner of the churchyard and watched from the anonymity of her car as groups of people gathered near the church doors. In the yellow light that spilled from inside the church, the faces of men in heavy winter coats were illuminated. They moved from foot to foot in an attempt to thwart the icy chill, as their wives clutched at each other's arms in a flurry of faux fur. These, she thought, were the people who had shared her father's life.

In the street the cavalcade of rush hour traffic passed the gates – a procession as slow as that, which would bring the dead man to his mourners. She watched them pass, and felt strangely detached. Heads turned and the crowd dispersed to make way for the long black hearse as it drove slowly through the gates. It was followed by a single mourning car from which Rachel Arnold stepped, her head held erect as she stood by and watched the pall bearers slide her husband's coffin from the back of the hearse and then wheel it into the church. Several people touched her arm, and she exchanged words with them as she passed.

Joanna waited until the crowd outside the church had entered. And with a final glance in the rear view mirror she stepped from the car and crossed quickly to the entrance. A man reached the door just as she did. He nodded and beckoned for her to enter first. There was quite a crowd in the church. She saw Rachel Arnold sitting in the first pew alone staring straight ahead at her husband's coffin. Those who were already seated watched the door for other arrivals. She felt their eyes upon her as she slipped into a pew near the back of the church, aware as she did so of the man she had met in the doorway sitting one pew ahead of her at the other of the aisle. She caught his eyes and then looked away.

Vince Arnold's coffin was mahogany with two shiny brass handles at the sides. She stared at it and reminded herself that the man inside had been her father, but she couldn't reconcile the thought with her failure to feel anything akin to emotion. The closest she could get was a macabre curiosity about the dead man. His death did not mean as much to her as the fact that he had so recently been alive and that her mother's lies had robbed her of ever finding out who she truly was. Vince Arnold's blood may have gone cold, but it continued to run through her veins and that had to mean something.

She scanned the room for her mother. Her eyes moved over the rows of people that filled the church as they had once filled her father's life, but her mother was not there.

She had waited in the house all afternoon for her return, but there was nothing, not even a phone call to explain where she was and Joanna had begun to worry. The priest's voice droned on in the background. She didn't listen to the sermon, instead she wondered about her mother's whereabouts, and the reason she had failed to return. Was what she had to tell her so bad that she couldn't come home? As these thoughts swam around her head, she became aware of someone watching her.

She looked up to find the same man that she had met in the entrance staring at her. Embarrassed she looked away, but when she turned her head to look at him a moment later, he was still looking. He smiled and she returned his gaze, but not his smile. The woman next to her had been trying to control a cough, which now had become uncontrollable. She stood and Joanna stood to let her pass, and when she returned her gaze to the man he was looking toward the altar, and whatever connection had been between them was severed.

The ceremony ended sooner than she'd anticipated. The church organ played and Rachel Arnold made her way slowly down the aisle accompanied by a man and woman who Joanna assumed were relatives. Rachel caught sight of her as she passed and she nodded solemnly in recognition. Joanna nodded back, and suddenly Rachel was gone and the people in the pew where she stood waited for her to move so that they, too, could file out of the church to pay their respects to the widow. Ahead of her Joanna saw the man who had smiled at her. He was unshaven and wore a long black coat. He disappeared through the doors as she walked slowly behind the crowd.

When she stepped outside she saw Rachel Arnold. She was talking to the man in the black coat and Joanna wondered who he was. He shook Rachel's hand; she gripped it and held it in hers for a moment before he moved away. The procession was growing shorter and Joanna found herself standing just feet from Rachel Arnold wondering what she should say, and then suddenly she was before her and Rachel Arnold had taken her hand in hers and was squeezing it as she had done with those before her.

'You came,' she said.

Joanna nodded.

'I'm glad. I'd like to talk to you about last night...your mother...I assume she told you?'

'No...I mean, yes, about Vince, yes, but nothing else...'

Rachel's eyes searched her face. Joanna was aware of the people behind her waiting to speak to Rachel. The man in the black coat was standing in the churchyard smoking a cigarette. The smoke mingled with the foggy air and drifted round him.

'Does she know you're here?'

'It was my decision.'

'But she didn't want it?'

Joanna looked past Rachel to where the man stood. He looked up and saw her watching.

'That man...the one in the black coat...who is he?'

Rachel turned and looked at him. 'He's the one that found Vince.'

'Do you know him?'

Rachel shook her head. 'He's a solicitor. I called him...I wanted to ask him...you know...what he'd seen.'

The man nodded to them both. Joanna felt the impatience of the people behind her who didn't want to leave without speaking to Rachel.

'Look, I'd better...'

'One second...' Rachel dipped her hand in her bag and then held a piece of paper towards her. 'This is my address,' she said. 'Please, come round any time...when all this is finished. If you want to, that is...'

Joanna took the piece of paper and looked at it. Rachel had scribbled the address and telephone number on it previously. She must have expected her to come. She put it in her pocket ignoring the pleading look in the woman's eyes.

The man was still smoking. He watched unsurprised as she approached him. He blew the smoke away from her and waited for her to speak.

'Hi. She told me that you were the one that found him...' she said.

'That's right.'

'I'm Joanna. The man...Vince...he was my father.'

'I'm sorry.' He offered his hand. 'Oliver. Oliver Molloy,' he said. His hand was cold. He gripped her hand firmly and then let go. He inhaled one last time on his cigarette before throwing it on the ground and extinguishing it with a twist of his heel.

'Your mother called me...asked me to come. I didn't know him.'

'She's not my mother.'

'Ah...I thought...'

'They said he was trapped...under the ice?'

Oliver nodded.

‘How was he...when you found him I mean...was the body...?’

She stopped, unsure of what she wanted to say.

Oliver studied her for a moment before he answered.

‘He was at the edge, caught up in the reeds. He probably floated down from somewhere else and got caught there. I didn’t see him really...like you said he was beneath the ice...’

‘Do you think it was an accident?’

‘I suppose...do you?’ he said.

His grey eyes looked into hers with interest.

‘I wouldn’t know...never met him. I didn’t know anything about him till last night...I still don’t.’

The man watched her, waited for some kind of explanation. The silence forced her to speak.

‘My mother never told me about him...and then last night *she* came...’

‘I’m sorry...that must have been quite a shock.’

Most of the people had left the churchyard. There was a small group at the front of the church with Rachel. Joanna saw her look across at them. She must have wondered what they were talking about.

‘I’d better go,’ Joanna said. ‘Thanks...for talking to me...I’m sure you must think it strange...’

The man reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out his wallet.

‘Take my card. If you ever want to call me...for advice or just to chat...’

She took the card from between his fingers. Molloy and Byrne Solicitors was written on it in thick black print.

‘Not just legal advice...anything at all...sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger.’

Joanna nodded and slipped the card into her pocket. She thanked him again, and he smiled, the same quick smile that he’d given her in the church. She noticed that he had a gap between his front teeth and that the stubble on his jaw was greying. He didn’t look much like a solicitor, she thought, as she watched in the rear view mirror as he made his way across the churchyard to where Rachel Arnold stood.

Chapter Seven

Oliver watched the red Peugeot pull out of the churchyard, and stamped his feet to keep warm. The woman was talking with the last of the mourners and he wondered what she wanted to speak to him about. He wanted another cigarette, but he figured it wouldn't be long before the dead man's wife summoned him, and so he shoved his hands into his coat pockets and thought about the air of frustration that he'd got from Vince Arnold's illegitimate daughter.

He had noticed her in the church. Her long auburn hair was striking amongst the dark clothes that the mourners wore - so much black in one place. She'd looked ill at ease in the church, like she didn't belong there. Now, he understood why. What a shock it must have been to find out about her father in such a way. He wondered if she'd call him, and found himself hoping that she would. It would be a distraction from his problems - and maybe they could help each other to forget.

He heard Rachel Arnold say goodbye to the last of her friends, and when he looked up she was walking towards him. The driver of the mourning car stood by waiting.

'Mr Molloy, thank you for waiting.'

'Please, call me Oliver.'

'Oliver.' She tried out the sound of the name on her tongue to see if it fit right.

'Mr...Oliver, I was hoping to have a word, but not here. Would you come to the house? Would that be all right?'

'Of course.'

Rachel handed him a card. 'Here's the address. Meet me there in say half an hour if you can.'

Rachel got into the black car and the driver closed the door. She didn't look at him as the car passed and he thought that whatever it was she wanted to talk to him about, it was unlikely that he could help her. He hadn't seen her husband, not really. He didn't know anything about him - only what he'd read in the newspapers.

Half an hour later, Oliver found himself in front of a two-storey house on Grove Road. It wasn't far from the place where he'd found the body of the man that had lived there. In the driveway there was a silver BMW. He looked at the registration plate and saw that it was almost brand new. Vince Arnold liked to spend his money on expensive toys.

He got out of his car and walked up the path. There was a light on in the front room. He could see it through a chink in the curtains, and he imagined Rachel Arnold

restlessly anticipating his arrival. He rang the doorbell. There was movement inside and Rachel appeared. She looked tired, he thought, and worried. She ushered him inside and closed the door quickly behind him. She smiled a tight smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

'Would you like a drink?' she said.

She had already moved to a cabinet in the corner of the room and was pouring herself a brandy.

'I don't drink when I'm driving.'

'Wise decision.'

She lifted the glass to her lips and took a good-sized mouthful. She swiped the hand that was holding the glass across her forehead as though she were in pain, which she no doubt was. The liquid sloshed from the glass and raised her hand to her lips to consume the spillage.

'I'll come straight to the point. My husband owed money. He liked to gamble...horses...dogs...anything that moved. We're not talking a few thousand...he was deeply in debt...the kind of money he could never have repaid.'

Rachel Arnold put down her drink, opened the drawer in a bureau by the window and took out a packet of cigarettes. She smiled quickly and placed one between her lips.

'He didn't like me smoking,' she said.

Oliver shifted and watched as she threw the packet back in the drawer without offering him one.

'This money your husband owed...who did he owe it to – the banks?'

Rachel nodded, drew deeply on the cigarette and exhaled a cloud of grey smoke, which lingered around her.

'Banks mostly, but there were other debts, too... A few months ago this man started coming to the house – swarthy, a strong Dublin accent, not the type of man that Vince would normally have had anything to do with. I questioned him about it and he laughed, said the man was connected with horse racing, which I figured he no doubt was, but not in the training end of things. Later, I found out that the man worked for a bookie that Vince owed a lot of money to.'

She drew on the cigarette again, exhaled and tapped it in an ashtray that had a map of Cyprus in the bottom.

'How much?'

‘What?’

‘How much money did Vince owe?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know – but Vince left an envelope one day for this man to collect. I opened it and there was two thousand euro inside in fifty-euro notes. The next time he came, there was no envelope and he told me to tell Vince that he’d be back. I didn’t like the way he looked at me when he said it.’

‘So you’re worried that these people might expect you to repay the debt?’

‘I’m worried what they might do if I don’t.’

Rachel gave him a quick look, and stubbed the cigarette in the ashtray so that the top part of Cyprus had disappeared beneath the ash.

‘Did your husband have life insurance?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re the beneficiary?’

She nodded. ‘It’s not the bank I’m worried about. Vince made sure that any loans taken out were in his name only...it’s the money lender...frankly, I’m frightened about what they might do.’

‘If I were you, I’d pay them. If you’re the beneficiary of the policy like you said you are, you’ve got nothing to worry about. These are not the kind of men to write off a bad debt, especially if they know you’re about to come into some money. In fact for them your husband’s death is a godsend...’

Oliver paused and Rachel Arnold looked at him. He knew by her expression that she knew what he was thinking.

‘You’re wondering if my husband’s death was an accident,’ she said.

She picked up her brandy glass and moved towards the sofa. She didn’t sit on the seat; instead she perched on the arm and eyed him over the rim of the glass.

‘Was it?’ he said.

‘The coroner seems to think so.’

‘But you don’t?’

‘Really, Oliver, I couldn’t say. At first I thought yes, but then other thoughts occurred to me. There was the money. I thought that maybe it had got too much. He was betting and losing. I knew by the foul mood he was in when he came home that things were getting worse. He was barely making his deadlines at work. He’d sit up all night to finish an article for the paper. And then that man turned up and I knew there’d be consequences.’

Rachel had risen from the arm of the sofa and had begun to pace as she talked. Now, she stopped in front of Oliver and looked up at him with clear grey eyes.

‘You must wonder why I’m telling you this, but I needed to tell someone. You know about the law, and plenty, I’m sure about the people that break it. Nobody knows about the debt that Vince was in and I intend keeping it that way...so you think that I should pay them?’

If you have the money, then yes. Either that or get out of here...go some place where no one can find you.’

Rachel nodded, drained her glass and set it down on a tempered-glass coffee table in the centre of the room.

‘I saw you talking to Joanna in the churchyard,’ she said.

‘I thought she was your daughter,’ he said.

‘And she told you that she wasn’t?’

‘She mentioned it, yes.’

He didn’t know why, but he had an instinct to protect the girl and in doing so he didn’t intend relaying their brief conversation to Rachel Arnold.

Rachel sighed. ‘The result of one of my husband’s early misdemeanours,’ she said. She smiled. ‘My husband has...had many faults, Oliver, but his charm outweighed them all. Are you sure you won’t have that drink?’

‘Thank you, but no, I should get going.’

Rachel nodded and put a hand on his arm. He could see that she was a little unsteady from the brandy, and imagined that it had probably not been her first. She stared at him, her grey eyes wide and trusting, and for a moment he thought she might have been about to pull him towards her, but she pressed his arm and turned away.

‘Thank you for coming, you didn’t have to,’ she said.

She was pouring herself another drink when he showed himself out.

Chapter Eight

On the morning of her father's funeral Joanna woke to find that her mother still hadn't returned. Determined to find her, she took out the Golden Pages and set about dialling all of the hotels in the greater Dublin area.

An hour later having been told by yet another receptionist that no – the hotel had no one by the name of Angela Lacey staying with them, she began to lose hope. Tracing her finger down the blackened column of the directory she crossed an X next to her latest disappointment and punched in the next number on the list.

'Good morning, Summerhill House Hotel, can I help you?'

Joanna listened to the woman's singsong voice that rose and wavered on the last syllable and wondered if anyone could really be that happy. Then she enquired if there was a guest by the name of Angela Lacey staying at the hotel.

'Just a moment and I'll check that for you Madam,' the woman said.

Joanna could hear the woman's fingers on the keyboard. She imagined perfectly manicured nails deftly tapping the keys. There was a pause, followed by more tapping and the woman cleared her throat.

'Yes, Madam. We have an Angela Lacey staying at the hotel. Would you like me to connect you to her room?'

Joanna's heart quickened.

'No, no that's all right, thank you,' she said.

She drew a circle round the name of the hotel as she hung up. She sat there and looked at it for a moment, then took a deep breath and hurried out to the hall to pull on her boots and coat.

Outside, the cold persisted. The ice had thawed, but the met office was threatening snow. As she got into the car, Joanna realised that she'd forgotten her gloves, but she didn't have time to return to the house, and so she started the engine and reversed as quickly as she dared out the driveway.

The Summerhill House hotel was situated in the small town of Eniskerry, County Wicklow. A peaceful place surrounded by acres of green fields. Her mother had clearly gone there seeking solitude. Now beyond the hedges that lined either side of the narrow country road, Joanna could see that the Met office's prediction had already come to fruition in Wickow and the lush green fields were transformed by a coating of perfect white. Cautiously, she drove the winding road. The trees' bare branches scratched occasionally against the car and stray snowflakes stuck to and melted on the

windscreen. She followed the signpost, and then turned in the tall black gates that led down the narrow laneway to the hotel.

She pulled up just opposite the entrance and switched the ignition off. Her heart beat fast in anticipation of confronting her mother. She wondered how she would react to her showing up, would she refuse to talk or would she relent and return home? She must know that she couldn't stay away indefinitely.

Joanna stepped from the car and pulled her coat tighter round her throat. She could feel adrenaline coursing through her veins as she mounted the steps and entered the warmth of the hotel. It was quiet inside the lobby. She guessed that not many visitors came in winter. A middle-aged woman sat behind the tall mahogany reception desk. She refused to look up until she'd finished whatever it was she'd been doing on the computer.

As Joanna stood waiting for the woman to finish, the lift pinged and she looked up expectantly. An elderly couple stepped out. The man pulled both their suitcases as the woman walked behind him. Finally the receptionist looked up with what might have been a smile.

'Can I help you?'

'Yes, could you tell me which room Angela Lacey is staying in, please?'

The woman turned to the computer, tapped in the surname and looked at the screen for a moment.

'I'm sorry, Madam. Ms Lacey checked out this morning.'

'Are you sure? I called earlier and the receptionist told me that my mother was here.'

The woman gave her a brief, curious glance.

'She stayed for two nights, but I'm afraid she's checked out. It's on the system.'

Joanna felt her face grow hot as the woman eyed her over her glasses. She mumbled a thank you and turned away. Her mother had escaped again.

As she stepped outside cold air stung her flaming cheeks. She saw the old couple making their way slowly toward the exit and she considered showing them the picture of her mother that she kept in her wallet and asking them if they'd seen her, but it would be futile. If the woman at the desk was right, her mother had moved on.

She got into the car and stared out across the fields beyond the hotel. She could see the headstones in the old village cemetery, and it reminded her that Vince Arnold would be buried by now, his coffin six feet below the frozen earth. She thought of

Rachel Arnold and her invitation to visit the house. She opened her wallet and looked for the address that Rachel had scribbled on the scrap of paper, but instead her hand alighted on the business card that Oliver Molloy had given her at the church. He'd told her to call him if she wanted to talk. She turned the card over in her hands, and looked once more at the entrance to the hotel, the place where her mother had so recently departed from. She couldn't bear the thoughts of returning to the empty house to wait once more, and she preferred not to talk to Rachel Arnold until she had spoken to her mother. It was only fair to hear her mother's version of events – if she ever decided to return home.

With his business card in one hand, Joanna dialled Oliver Molloy's number. He answered on the second ring.

'Is that Oliver...Oliver Molloy?'

'Yes, speaking.'

'This is Joanna Lacey...I met you last night at the church...'

'Joanna, yes. How are you doing?'

There was noise in the background. His voice was slightly breathless as though he was walking and she guessed that he was in the street somewhere in the city.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you. I wondered if you could show me the place where you found him...I'd just like to see it, to know...'

Joanna closed her eyes and waited for his response. There was a lot of background noise, shuffling and the sound of a car door slamming before everything became quiet.

'Okay. I've just finished with a client. I could meet you, say, at six o' clock. There's a café near Harold's Cross called Cinnamon – do you know it?'

'Yes, yes, I think so.'

'Great. Well, I'll meet you outside. We can walk from there. You've got my number...just call me if you've any problem finding it.'

Joanna thanked him and hung up. She liked the sound of his voice. It was deep, educated. On the phone he sounded business-like, more the solicitor than he'd been the previous night. She wondered how he would be when they met. She knew that there was nothing he could tell her about her father, but she had a macabre desire to see where Vince Arnold's body had been found. She hadn't spoken to Rachel of his death, and she wondered if she thought that it had simply been an accident – that

Vince Arnold was a victim of the biggest freeze to hit the country in more than forty years.

When she opened the front door she was met by the resounding silence that had echoed throughout the house since her mother's disappearance. She entered the living room to see the red light flashing on the telephone answer machine and she crossed the room and pressed the button hopefully, but it was not her mother's voice that greeted her, but the voice of Rachel Arnold.

'Hello...this is Rachel Arnold. I'm leaving a message for Joanna. I'd be grateful if you could call me. You can get me at home on...'

Joanna listened as Rachel dictated the number, then she sat on the sofa, looked at her photographs scattered on the floor, and wondered what it was that her father's wife wanted.

Chapter Nine

By the café on the corner she waited, her stillness punctuated by the flashing blue of the neon light that hung low in the café's window. From beneath the cover of a black woollen beret her long auburn hair hung loose round her shoulders as it had the previous night when he'd met her at the entrance to the church, before he had known that she was Vince Arnold's daughter.

She was not looking in his direction, and he had the opportunity to observe her until he was almost upon her. She wore black leather boots to her knees over tight blue jeans. One hand was buried in the pocket of her leather jacket while the other, black-gloved, rested on the strap of her shoulder bag. She looked into the distance, unheeding of passers-by, and he wondered what it was that she was thinking.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he said.

'You came. I thought maybe you wouldn't.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. You didn't have to,' she said.

When she looked at him her eyes were the colour of storms.

In the café, beyond the glare of the neon sign, people cupped their hands round steaming mugs of coffee. He gestured towards the glass.

'Would you like to get a coffee or something?'

She shook her head.

'I'd prefer to see the place while there's still light.'

It was a subtle reminder that it was not for him she'd come.

He nodded and told her that it was better if they took his car as the light was fading fast. She agreed and they weaved their way through the passers-by to the edge of the footpath and waited for a break in the traffic. He felt an urge to put a hand beneath her elbow as they crossed the road, but he resisted it. He didn't know her after all, didn't know how she would react to it, and so he kept his hands in his pockets.

'This must strike you as strange?' she said.

She'd taken her gloves off and was holding her hands in front of the heat vents.

He shook his head.

'I'm a solicitor. It takes a lot to surprise me.'

On their left the canal lay, still frozen, but there were wet patches where the ice had thinned and he guessed that the freeze was nearing its end. He glanced at the girl whose eyes followed the path of ice even as she spoke.

‘Yesterday, I told you I’d never met Vince Arnold. Until that woman came to the house two nights ago, I’d never even heard his name.’

There was a pause, in which he presumed the girl anticipated a question, but he remained silent, and she went on.

‘My mother...she said I was the result of a one-night stand. She said he didn’t know about me, but that wasn’t true. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have come, would she, if she hadn’t known?’

‘You mean Rachel Arnold?’

He looked at her, and the girl nodded.

‘If she knew, then so did he, but he never even tried to see me.’

‘What did your mother say about it?’

‘That’s the thing...I haven’t talked to her. The night Rachel Arnold came, she got really upset. She said she couldn’t talk about it, that she’d explain everything the following morning, and then she left in the night.’

‘And you haven’t heard from her?’

‘No. This morning I spent hours calling hotels trying to locate her, and eventually I did – but when I got there she’d already checked out. Maybe the receptionist told her someone had called.’

‘Doesn’t she have a mobile?’

‘Yes, but it’s turned off. She rarely uses it.’

They passed the Mespil Hotel and he pulled into a parking space at the side of the bank. He hadn’t been there since, and he wanted to make sure that he didn’t miss the place where he had come upon the body of Vince Arnold.

‘We’ll walk from here. It’s not far,’ he said.

The girl nodded, unfastened her seatbelt in silence and stepped from the car. She stared towards the water as she waited for him, and he had an instinct to protect her, but from what he wasn’t sure.

‘I wonder what he was doing out here. It’s so bleak.’

‘Just walking, I guess.’

‘But in this weather...you’d want to be mad.’

The girl shuddered and he wondered if it were the cold or the thought of being submerged in the icy water that caused it. He had imagined it, too, the plunge into the icy water and the man’s failed struggle to escape. Suffocation was a slow process. Had the man known that his fight was lost as his body sank beneath the murky water

and he attempted to draw his last breath? An image of Mercedes came to him, unbidden; her eyes wide as she sought to understand what was happening in that final moment before her eyes closed forever. He looked at the girl by his side and willed the memory away.

They walked in silence, each one preoccupied with their thoughts. When they'd grown close to the spot where he had discovered Vince Arnold's body, Oliver slowed his step and the girl did likewise. The ice had melted in places and the water had seeped into the earth. The only sound was the squelching of their shoes as their feet sank and freed themselves, again and again in the mud, a pleasantly childish sound that reminded him of when he was a boy.

He watched the edge of the water closely, wondering if he would be able to identify the exact spot where he had seen the body. And then he saw tyre tracks in the mud, footsteps filled with murky water led to the edge of the bank, and he remembered the rescue workers retrieving the body from amongst the rushes close to the water's edge.

'This is it,' he said. 'This is the place.'

He slowed down, allowed the girl to walk ahead. She paused where the tracks stopped, stood there and gazed into the water in silence. Her expression was unreadable. He wondered what she was thinking. She stared into the water for a long time. Then she looked around her as though she wanted to imprint a vision of the landscape on her mind. She looked at the weeping willows that hung over the canal's edge on the opposite side of the bank. She glanced at the sky, and back to the water again. Finally she turned away. She nodded at Oliver, and without a word they began to make their way back to the car.

They drove in silence. He put the heat on high and the girl stretched her legs towards the warmth that wafted from the vents near the floor. When they'd reached the café, he pulled into a parking spot by the side of the road. The blue neon light was still flashing.

'I don't suppose you want to get that coffee?' he said.

The girl smiled. 'I'm sorry...for being like this. I'm not usually so maudlin. I'm just trying to get my head around it all.'

'That's a no then?'

'It's a yes, if you can bear to put up with me a bit longer.'

'I've put up with worse. How bad can it get?' he said.

The girl laughed and undid her seatbelt. Her eyes narrowed when she laughed and he noticed that she had incredibly white teeth. He told her to wait as he went round to her side of the car and opened the door that was facing into the traffic. This time he took her arm as they crossed the road to the café.

Chapter Ten

Joanna stood outside the front porch of Vince Arnold's house and leaned on the bell. Through a diamond-shaped glass just above the centre of the door, she saw a figure move down the hallway and she braced herself to meet Rachel.

'Joanna, you got my message. Please, come in.'

Joanna nodded, deeply aware as Rachel stood back to invite her into the warmly lit hallway that she was entering her father's house for the first time. She glanced round the hall. Everything was a deep cream colour. A large Monet print hung above the stairs, and a man's navy sports jacket lay draped across the banister. She resisted the urge to touch it as she followed Rachel into the living room.

As in the hall, both walls and floor in the living room were cream. Bracket lights subtly lit the room and highlighted more Monet prints, as Joanna's feet sank in the deep pile carpet. She wondered if the Arnolds had a genuine interest in fine art or if the prints had been chosen disinterestedly simply for decorative reasons.

'Would you like a drink?' Rachel asked.

Joanna shook her head. It wasn't even six p.m. When she looked at Rachel Arnold she was standing by a bureau by the window pouring herself a large glass of brandy with unsteady hands. Her eyes, when they met Joanna's, were unapologetic.

Rachel took a mouthful of brandy and set down the glass. She then opened a drawer in the bureau, pulled out an envelope and tapped it in her hands.

'I asked you here because I wanted to give you this,' she said.

Joanna eyed the envelope without making any attempt to take it.

'What is it?'

'Just something I'd like you to have. Please, take it.'

There was a slight tremor in Rachel's voice as she stood, arm outstretched, beseeching Joanna to take the envelope from her.

When she did, the paper was thick between her fingers. She peeled it open, aware of Rachel's eyes upon her as she pulled out a neat bundle of fifty-euro notes held together by an elastic band.

'What's this? I mean...I can't take this. What is it - some kind of bribe?'

'No, no it's nothing like that. It's...Vince wanted you to have it. Take it, please - for his sake, not mine.'

'Where did it come from? What do you mean he wanted me to...was there a will?'

Rachel turned towards her again, but didn't meet her eyes.

‘Yes...look it’s five thousand euro. It’s not a lot, but it’s yours. Do what you want with it.’

Joanna looked at the bundle of notes before returning it to the envelope. She didn’t want Vince Arnold’s money. What she wanted from him was something that had once been improbable and was now a total impossibility. But still, he’d contributed nothing to her upbringing...maybe she ought to take it. Five thousand euro was hardly compensation for twenty-four years. She deserved a lot more than that. She deserved the truth.

‘How long have you known?’ Joanna asked.

‘Known what?’

‘About me...when did you find out?’

‘I knew before you were born.’

‘And you didn’t care? Didn’t care that my mother was pregnant?’

Rachel looked at her with surprise, which quickly turned to anger.

‘Care? Of course I cared. How would you feel if you knew your husband had been sleeping with another woman?’

‘Your husband?’

Rachel nodded, fiercely.

‘Yes, my husband. What did you think...that I was the one...that Vince had been your mother’s and..?’

Rachel laughed a short, bitter laugh.

‘My God, you got it so wrong, Joanna.’

Rachel rose from the arm of the chair and crossed the room. She took a packet of cigarettes from her bag. And with shaking hands she shook one from the box and placed it between her lips. Joanna watched as she lit up and inhaled deeply.

‘So my mother and Vince...’

‘Had an affair, yes. Not what you expected, was it?’

‘Why didn’t you leave him?’

Rachel exhaled. Her words mingling with the blue smoke that drifted round her.

‘Leave him? Why? Why would I change my life for the sake of a stupid fling?’ she said.

‘Is that what it was?’

Rachel shrugged. ‘He agreed to end it.’

‘And what about me? Did he agree to forget about me, too? Did you see to that?’

Joanna's words were bitter. Rachel paused and tapped her cigarette over an ashtray before she answered. Her words when she spoke were measured, calm.

'I offered to take you,' she said. 'Vince and I couldn't have children, and I was desperate for them. I wanted to take you and bring you up as my own.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Believe what you want, but it's true.'

'So you spoke to my mother, you actually asked her to give me up?'

Rachel nodded, slowly.

'Your mother wasn't interested. She didn't want money, she was only interested in Vince,' she said.

Joanna looked at her, amazed.

'What...you offered to buy me?' she said.

'Adoption was difficult. And you were Vince's child. Ask your mother. She'll tell you what I've said is true.'

Rachel picked up the bottle of brandy, but thought better of it and put it down again.

'Why did you come to the house that night? Why bother?' Joanna asked.

'I thought you had a right to know. Do you wish I hadn't?'

'I don't know. Maybe. Things were fine before.'

Rachel walked back to the armchair and sat facing Joanna. Her expression had softened.

'Look, I didn't intend telling you any of this - not yet. But what about your mother...what did she tell you?'

Joanna looked at her hands.

'Nothing. She left the night you came.'

'What do you mean? Where did she go?'

'She was too upset to talk about it, said she'd tell me everything in the morning, but then in the morning, she was gone.'

'And you've not heard from her since?'

'No.'

Rachel nodded, tapped the ash from her cigarette.

'And you wanted answers. I can understand that. I'm sorry they're not the ones you wanted, answers seldom are,' she said.

Joanna looked at the envelope again. She thought of the money that Rachel Arnold had offered her mother to give her up. But her mother hadn't accepted. She had wanted her despite or perhaps because of the fact that she was Vince Arnold's child.

'Why didn't he ever try to see me?'

Rachel shrugged.

'He'd caused too much pain; to your mother, to me. It was easier to move on, pretend it never happened. It's what we're conditioned to do, isn't it? Adapt.'

Joanna nodded. She stood up, and Rachel took her cue to show her to the door. As she passed the blue sports coat hanging over the banister, Joanna was tempted again to touch it, but she would show no such sentiment before her father's wife.

Chapter Eleven

Oliver closed the door behind his last client of the day and walked to the window. The evening air was punctuated by the sound of car horns as frustrated commuters attempted to escape the chaos of the city in order to return to their comfortable suburban lives. Below, the quays were blocked in both directions. Traffic inched forward en masse like some huge lumbering beast as pedestrians launched themselves in front of slow-moving cars to cross bridges whose lights burned orange in the blackness of the Liffey.

A rough-looking couple were arguing in the street. The man took a few steps towards the woman who pointed a finger in his face as he swayed and gesticulated, spilling beer from the can that he clutched in one hand. The woman lifted a hand as though she was about to slap him, but he turned away. She tugged at his arm, and he shrugged her off, raised the can to his lips and made his way back towards the boardwalk where he would probably spend the night. The names she shouted after him hung in the night air.

Oliver turned away from the window. Disgusted by the fact that he had wanted the man to strike out. He wanted him to lose his patience with the woman; the fact that he hadn't rendered he, Oliver, the inferior of the two. If *he* had walked away, none of it would have happened. Mercedes would, at that moment, be making dinner in their house across the city – the house that he couldn't bear to return to each evening, instead choosing to stay late in the office replaying the events again and again in his mind, tormenting himself with the possibility of an alternative outcome – one that might not have been so devastatingly absolute.

Mercedes had been in the kitchen that day when he arrived. A rich aroma of cooking spiked the air. She didn't answer when he shouted hello and he assumed she hadn't heard him and continued up to the bedroom where he kicked off his shoes, undid his tie and pulled on a warm fleece over his white shirt. When he went back downstairs she was putting dinner on the table.

They talked about their day. He didn't notice anything strange in her behaviour; she hid it well. Then she began to tell him about a guy in the office at work who was having an affair with a French girl in her department. She cursed him. She didn't blame the girl, she said, she was smitten and couldn't see that he was never going to leave his wife for her.

‘I suppose the only thing she can be blamed for is being foolish. What do you think?’ she said.

Oliver shrugged and told her he’d seen that kind of case so many times. Of course the law would say that the man was wrong, the mistress: she wouldn’t come into it, and the wife, well she’d try to take the man for every penny she could get. They always did.

‘I’m not talking about law; I’m talking about lives. I mean...who’s to blame, the husband or the girl? What if I were the wife, for example. Who do you think I should take it out on, you or the girl that you seduced?’

It was then that he went on his guard.

‘Look, not everything is black and white,’ he said.

‘Isn’t it?’

‘No, you don’t know these people, their situation.’

‘Ah, but I do.’

Mercedes’s eyes flashed as she spat the words and he knew that she’d found out. He should never have believed that Carmen would keep quiet. She was too like Mercedes, a straight talker. She liked to get her own way, but she lacked Mercedes’s morals. Carmen didn’t care whose lives she destroyed to get what she wanted, and she knew that her sister was likely to forgive her in time.

Mercedes had stood up and instinctively he did the same. She walked round to his side of the table, drew her tiny frame up to its full height and slapped him so hard that his cheek stung.

‘Why did you do it?’ she said. ‘Why the fuck did you have to do it, and with Carmen. You...you think you’re so above it all, above everyone, but you’re weak. Can’t you see it? You’re just like the rest of them. Dangle a piece of bait and you’re hooked. It’s pathetic.’

He tried to apologise. He told her that yes; he’d been weak at that moment. Hell, they hadn’t had sex for the last couple of months. What did she expect him to do? He realised as he said it that his apology with its counter-accusation was probably not the best tactic, but he couldn’t help but try to push some of the blame on to her. It was his only mechanism of defence.

‘So, you don’t think your sister had any part in this,’ he snarled. ‘You don’t think that her coming round here when you were away, dressed like a...like a fucking

prostitute had anything to do with it? I mean, what man with blood in his veins wouldn't for Christ sakes? She was screaming for it!

Mercedes hit him again. This time it wasn't just a slap. She pummelled and kicked him, and he tried to grab hold of her wrists to stop her, but she bit his hand so hard she drew blood. He knew that he should've taken it, but something inside him just snapped. Mercedes lashed out, her fist catching his jaw. He stumbled backward, and then lunged at her. His hands were round her throat as he pushed her down onto the sofa. She struggled and he pressed down harder to prevent her from hitting him again. He was appalled and aroused by the violence, and the more she tried to free his hands from her throat, the tighter he clenched them. When she finally stopped struggling, he released her. He thought that he had merely tired her out, stopped her from attacking him. Wasn't that what he had set out to do?

Oliver's hands were shaking from the memory as he tidied away the files on his desk. He jumped when the door opened and his partner, Colin Byrne, appeared in the doorway.

'Is there something you're keeping from me, Oliver?'

'What?'

He froze at the open cabinet.

'Is business better than I figure, because I'm beginning to think you're hoarding all the clients for yourself. You've been here late every night.'

'Ah. No, it's not that,' Oliver said.

He hesitated, returned the files to the drawer and locked it.

'To be honest, Colm, I've been having a few problems. Mercedes and I haven't been getting along.'

'Wouldn't it be better to go home then and try to sort it out?' Colin asked.

'It might if there was somebody there to sort things out with. She's gone away for a while. To be honest I'm not sure for how long. So, I'd rather be here sorting some stuff out, anything rather than sitting in that house thinking about her.'

Colin didn't ask questions. He was tactful, and when Oliver didn't offer any more information he took his cue to leave.

'She'll be back,' he said. He touched Oliver's shoulder before going home for the night.

The truth was he couldn't stand being in that house. He'd begun to take the phone off the hook in the evenings so that he didn't have to listen to Carmen Hernandez's messages. Sooner or later he knew that he would have to come up with something to put Carmen off for good. He'd considered sending her a letter. He'd even spent time copying Mercedes's handwriting, in order to send Carmen a note that said she never wanted to see her again, but then he'd given up. He knew that it wouldn't be enough, that there had to be something else, but without Mercedes he couldn't think of anything else. He could say that she had left him. Carmen would believe that, but he knew that Mercedes's disappearance would motivate her family to contact the police – and he wanted to avoid that for as long as he possibly could.

Chapter Twelve

Joanna slowed as she drove past the row of terraced houses scanning the brass figures on the doors until she came to number sixteen. She pulled in on the opposite side of the road where she had an uninterrupted view of the house, which was in total darkness. In the garden Oliver's four-wheel drive was parked. Frost sparkled on the roof. Joanna glanced at the upstairs windows. The curtains were drawn in both of the rooms. She imagined that Oliver, like most people, was sleeping. It was after 2a.m.

She turned off the headlights, but left the engine running. The radio was playing late night love songs. She pulled down the sun visor to look in the mirror. Her face was pale and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. She'd not had a proper night's sleep since her mother had left.

That night she'd lay sleepless thinking about what Rachel Arnold had told her. She went over the conversation again and again until she knew that sleep wouldn't come. She needed to talk to someone, and he was the first person that entered her mind.

Joanna opened her bag, took out some powder and ran the brush over her cheekbones. She moistened her lips with gloss. As she was looking in the mirror, she saw the lights of a car approaching. She turned off the interior light and waited for it to pass. The car, taxi plate unlit, slowed and drew in a short distance ahead – directly across from Oliver Molloy's house. Instinctively Joanna shrank in her seat.

Moments later the cab door opened and a woman stepped out. She leaned into the car and exchanged words with the driver before closing the door. She was dark haired and dark skinned, and her high-heels made a clicking sound as she walked stealthily across the icy road directly towards Oliver's house. When she reached the gate, she paused to look up at the windows. The gate made a creaking sound as she opened it and then she made her way up the path. The taxi had not moved. Joanna considered driving away, but the woman had just pressed the doorbell and she didn't want to risk being seen by Oliver if he opened the door, and so she sat motionless and watched from the anonymity of her car.

The woman stood back from the door and glanced once more at the windows. Then she raised the knocker and thudded it twice. The sound reverberated in the frosty air. She waited a few minutes and then knocked again, louder this time, but the house remained in darkness. Clearly deciding that she'd waited long enough, the woman turned and walked back down the drive. She swung open the door of the taxi, climbed in and was transported into the night.

Joanna straightened in her seat. She must have been crazy to even think about calling on Oliver at such an hour. She'd cut the engine when the taxi had pulled in, and she was about to gun it back into life when she heard a noise and Oliver's front door opened. She cowered in the car hoping that he wouldn't see her. He stepped into the garden, looked around and then walked down to the garden gate to close it. He had on a fleece, pyjama bottoms and slippers. He paused for a moment, and glanced down the street before walking back up the path and going inside the house. Joanna took a deep breath, relieved that he hadn't seen her. She started the engine and drove quickly away from his house.

All the way home, Joanna wondered about the woman who had got a taxi to Oliver Molloy's house. Who was she and why had she been calling at such an odd hour? The question dominated her thoughts to a degree that she didn't quite understand and she felt oddly disturbed by that. She didn't know Oliver. He was nothing to her, but a link to her father and for that reason she gravitated towards him. At least that was how she reasoned it in her mind. So why did the thought of him being involved with an attractive woman bother her so much? She discovered that, foolishly, she'd assumed he was single. He'd said nothing about having a girlfriend or a wife, but why would he? They had met once and had had that coffee together, but all they had talked about was Vince Arnold.

When she arrived home she realised that she'd forgotten to leave a light on. Darkness seemed to envelope her as soon as she stepped into the hall and she reached blindly for the light switch to dispel the disturbing presence that the night conjured. Then she went from room to room and turned on all of the lights to ensure that she was alone.

Exhausted, she climbed the stairs. In the landing she stopped and opened the door to her mother's room. The curtains were open and light from the streetlamp illuminated the room accentuating its emptiness. She pulled the curtains, turned on the light and lay down on her mother's bed. Where was she? Why hadn't she made contact by now? The room was cold, and she crept under the covers fully clothed and before long she had fallen asleep.

She dreamt that a policeman came to the door. He told her that her mother was dead – that she'd been found in the canal. The policeman took her to the place and they stood on the bank staring into the water. She could see her mother's body floating face upwards, her hair moved gently with the water's current, so that it

floated round her like seaweed. As they watched her mother's eyes opened and she tried to say something, but her mouth filled with water and her body disappeared beneath the surface leaving nothing but Joanna's own reflection swaying in the surge of the water. The policeman was no longer there.

Joanna woke to inaudible sounds coming from her own mouth. She sat up hurriedly in her mother's bed and tried to dissipate the awful remnants of her dream. She glanced at the red LED of the clock to find that it was almost 8a.m. She heard the voice of what sounded like a newscaster playing on a radio nearby. She got out of her mother's bed and opened the bedroom door. The noise of the radio was coming from downstairs. And the strong and welcoming aroma of coffee drifted up to meet her. Finally, her mother had come home.

Chapter Thirteen

Oliver sat looking at the glove that he'd found by the front door. It was a small, red knitted glove that belonged to a woman. He put it to his nose and inhaled the unmistakable woody scent of perfume that had been caught in the fibres, and then shuddered and put it down.

He had been asleep, but for once he'd not been dreaming, when the knocking had pulled him from slumber. Exhausted by late nights, he was slow to regain consciousness and he realised that it must have been going on for some time before he'd actually woken. Struggling out of bed, he'd lifted a corner of the curtain and peered out through the glass. The gate was open, but he didn't see anyone, and he began to think that he'd imagined the knocking until he'd opened the door and found the woman's glove only slightly damp from the short time it had been laying on the ground.

Oliver picked up the glove again to examine it. He tried to think if he'd ever seen Mercedes wearing such gloves, and then he told himself not to be ridiculous. They were the size of her hands, yes, but wasn't she cold as he'd laid her in the ground, wasn't her body, unquestioningly, lifeless? And a fragrance, a perfume meant nothing. The same scent was worn by millions of women around the globe, and was very likely to be used by sisters. Yes, there was only one explanation, but it did nothing to comfort him, Carmen Hernandez had come looking for answers.

Oliver took the glove and laid it on the mantelpiece. It was after two in the morning, but he knew that he was unlikely to sleep. He wondered if Carmen had taken a late flight from Madrid and got a taxi directly from the airport. Surely, she didn't think that he would put her up for the night? He was unlikely to so much as let her cross the threshold after what she'd done.

He got up and paced the room. Carmen's visit came as no surprise. He'd known after all those unanswered phone calls that she'd eventually turn up. And she wasn't the kind of woman to be shrugged off, particularly when she was on the scent of something. He cursed his stupidity in ever having become involved with her. But, catastrophically, he had and now he had to deal with the consequences – a dead wife, and if he didn't tread carefully – a pending police investigation.

Oliver went into the kitchen, turned on the light and put the kettle on to boil. He needed to think of a way to convince Carmen that Mercedes never wanted to see her again. He wished he'd known what had happened between the two sisters, how

Mercedes had reacted to Carmen's betrayal, but unfortunately Mercedes hadn't revealed what had been said between them. He imagined Carmen trying to convince Mercedes that she'd told her for her own good – Mercedes was always too ready to protect her little sister against the world, but would she have forgiven her this time? Would she have failed to see Carmen for the manipulator that she was?

Oliver spooned hot chocolate into a mug. There was no point in returning to bed to look at the ceiling. Instead, he went upstairs and opened the drawer in his desk where amongst the papers he kept was a bundle of letters that Mercedes had sent him in the time before they were married. He brought the letters downstairs. He didn't want to turn on the light in the front room in case Carmen Hernandez decided to return, and so he sat at the kitchen table, took the letters from their envelopes and began to read.

Mercedes's letters were full of sentiment. She said that she couldn't bear to be without him, and that the summer could not pass quickly enough until she returned to Dublin. He read two letters and then couldn't bear to read anymore. He didn't want to be reminded of the times that Mercedes had written about, about the nights that they had made love on a secluded beach near her hometown, or in her parents' house when he had crept from the guest room and silently stolen into the bedroom that she and Carmen had shared. He had been aware those nights of the probability of Carmen hearing their lovemaking. He had said as much to Mercedes, but she didn't care. She said nothing would wake Carmen she was such a heavy sleeper, and he had to admit the thought of Mercedes's younger sister lying in bed listening, perhaps watching the shapes of their bodies moving in the dark excited him. Was that when the idea had first taken seed with Carmen? Had she longed then for him to creep into her bed, instead of that of her sister? There were times when he half-expected them to have changed places just for fun, he wouldn't know, only Mercedes loved him, and there was no way that she'd have shared him with anyone else. It was no more than an idle fantasy on his behalf.

He had ignored Carmen's interest then, her blatant flirting. Mercedes had never paid attention, used as she was to her sister's precociousness. Only three years separated them, but Mercedes had seemed much more mature than her sister. There was a wild, almost feral wantonness about Carmen, which had both fascinated Oliver and made him wary. But clearly not wary enough, he thought. Carmen had got her way in the end and at a price far greater than any of them could have anticipated.

Oliver folded the letters and returned them to their envelopes. He hated that the thought of Carmen, much as he loathed her, still excited him. His chocolate had grown cold and he rose from the table and poured it down the sink. It was impossible to form a plan until he knew what had been said between Mercedes and her sister. He would have to face Carmen, perhaps charm her in order to prevent her from doing something rash like going to the police. Right now she didn't suspect that any harm had come to Mercedes. And that was how it must stay.

Chapter Fourteen

‘You’re back then?’

Joanna’s mother was pouring coffee when she entered the kitchen.

‘Coffee’s just made if you want some,’ she said.

She took out another mug, her back to Joanna as she spoke.

At her mother’s place at the kitchen table there was a notebook. Joanna glanced at the cover, which was battered from years of wear. She hadn’t seen it before and she wondered briefly if it were an old diary, if her mother had been reading over the past, preparing what she was going to say. What looked like a photograph poked its way from between the pages somewhere near the centre.

‘Where have you been?’ Joanna asked.

Her mother crossed the room, handed her a mug of coffee and retreated to sit at the table. Joanna followed.

‘I’m sorry, Joanna. I just had to get away.’

‘I looked everywhere. I rang almost every hotel in Dublin. Did you not think I’d be worried? I was going to start ringing the hospitals...’

She didn’t tell her mother she’d been to the Summerhill House Hotel. She wondered if her mother knew, if she’d told the receptionist to say that she’d checked out if anyone came. If she did, there was no flicker of recognition.

‘Why didn’t you tell me about Vince Arnold?’

Her mother sat with her head down, hands cupped round the mug.

‘I honestly thought it was for the best,’ she said.

‘Why...I mean, how could you know that?’

‘I didn’t, but I had to try and do what I *thought* was best.’

‘But for who? You? All those years, you said it was a one-night stand, that you didn’t know what happened to him, and he was living not two kilometres away. Did you not think I’d find out, that we wouldn’t meet him in the street or...did anyone else know?’

Her mother shook her head.

‘No.’

‘But why couldn’t you have told me? What was it you were so ashamed of?’

‘Ashamed? I wasn’t ashamed. I was ashamed of my own stupidity yes, but that wasn’t the reason. I didn’t tell you because you’d have wanted to find him. You’d

have wanted to know who he was and I didn't want him anywhere near me, or you. He had his chance...'

'Vince and Rachel - were they married then?'

Her mother nodded.

'We had an affair, yes. It's not something I'm proud of.'

Joanna leaned forward in her chair anxious to know the details.

'How did you meet him?'

'I was working in the GPO. He used to come in and we'd talk. One day he invited me for dinner. I didn't know he was married, and when I did it was too late.'

'How did you find out?'

'He told me. I said I never wanted to see him again, but he kept coming in when I was working. He wouldn't leave me alone, and really I didn't want him to. He'd take me places. Hotels. We'd book into a room whenever he could get away. It was exciting. A part of me loved the danger, even though I knew it was wrong. I never imagined I'd end up involved with a married man, but I did. Please, don't judge me, Joanna. You can't possibly know what it's like unless you find yourself in that situation. And I hope you never do. It wasn't a fling for me. I really convinced myself that something would come of it. That he'd finally realise that I was what he wanted. But he didn't, and I couldn't take that.'

'What did you do?'

'I told her.'

'Rachel?'

Her mother nodded.

'I wanted to show him that he couldn't treat me like that. That he couldn't...he was the kind of man that thought he could pick people up and drop them whenever he felt like it. Forever wasn't what was on his mind, I was just a bit of excitement, a bit of fun...'

'And when you told him about me he didn't want to know?' Joanna said.

Her mother nodded. 'Don't forget, Joanna. You didn't know about him, but he knew about you and he never made any attempt to be a part of your life.'

Joanna took a sip of her coffee. She'd decided not to say anything about her conversation with Rachel Arnold until she'd heard her mother's version of the truth. She knew that in a way she was testing her, waiting to see if her mother would tell her

about the Arnolds' proposal. If Vince Arnold hadn't wanted to know about her, would he really have offered her mother money so that he and Rachel could raise her?

'What did he say when you told him?' she asked.

'We met in a hotel. She, Rachel, had gone away some place. I still remember waiting in that hotel lounge, my stomach in knots. I kept telling myself it would be all right, that maybe this would make him see that his future was with me, with us, not her. When I told him he asked me if I was sure and I said yes. I knew by the look on his face that he wasn't going to react the way I'd hoped. He was cold, said he needed to go. I begged him to stay, to at least talk about it, but instead he gave me money for the room like I was some cheap tart he'd picked up, and he said he'd call me when he'd had time to think about it. It was then that I saw him for what he really was. I felt so stupid. The only thing he wanted was to escape.'

'Did he call?'

'A week passed. I kept thinking the phone would ring. I was still foolish enough to hope he'd change his mind, but I didn't hear anything from him.'

'And you decided to tell her?'

'The sadness turned to anger. I couldn't believe I'd been taken for such a fool. I thought why should he get away with it? Why should she continue to think he was a saint? She had a right to know what he was like, didn't she? Exposing him for what he was alleviated some of the pain. It made him see that he wasn't the one to control everything – I had power, too. Even if it wasn't the kind of power I wanted. I thought if she told him to get out, then maybe he'd change his mind. Despite everything, I still wanted him. I know that sounds crazy. After everything.'

Her mother paused. She picked up the notebook that Joanna had seen on the table. It fell open where the photograph was placed and she held it out to Joanna.

'That's Vince standing under Cleary's Clock.'

Joanna leaned forward and took the picture from her mother. She stared at it for a few minutes. It was black and white like the rest of the pictures in her mother's albums, but this one had not appeared in any album. It had been secreted away where she was unlikely ever to see it.

'He's handsome.'

'And he knew it. You should've seen the way women behaved around him. That's the only photo I've got. I burnt the rest. I couldn't bear to look at them, but some foolish, sentimental part of me made me keep that.'

Joanna handed back the picture of the young man in the sports coat smiling into the camera.

Her mother slipped it back into the notebook, closed it and put it to the side.

‘What happened after you told Rachel? I mean...what did she say? Did she believe you?’

‘Oh Rachel was cool. She listened to what I had to say, and then she told me to get out. I never met a woman with such composure. I have to admit, I admired her. If it had been the other way round I think I’d have gone crazy, but not Rachel. I don’t know what happened afterwards, what she said to him, but he came round to the house. He kept knocking and shouting in through the letterbox telling me to open the door, but I wouldn’t. A few days later, he came back again. My mother was at home this time, so I had to answer it. I didn’t want him making a scene at my parents’ house. We went out walking. At first he didn’t say anything. He seemed calmer than before and I began to hope that he’d left her.

He asked me why I’d done it. And I asked him why he hadn’t called. He said he’d intended to, as soon as he got everything straight in his head. That made me angry. What was I supposed to have done, waited? Not knowing if I was ever going to hear from him again. Then he told me that she, Rachel, hadn’t deserved it. I agreed with him, told him he should’ve thought of that before he got involved with me. I knew it was over. I knew by the way he was talking. I didn’t ask him what had happened - what she’d said. I didn’t want to know. I knew that somehow he’d won. That the only one to come out badly in all of this was me - and of course you. I didn’t want to give him the opportunity to reject you a second time, Joanna.’

Joanna waited but her mother didn’t say any more. She realised that she wasn’t about to tell her about the Arnolds’ proposal. And then she wondered if it were true or if Rachel Arnold had been lying to make herself look better.

Joanna cleared her throat before she spoke.

‘I was talking to Rachel Arnold.’

Her mother straightened in her chair on her guard suddenly.

‘Oh? Did she come round again?’

‘No, I went to the removal. You just left me without any answers and I needed to know something about him. I needed to know who he was.’

Joanna could hear the defensiveness in her own voice as she said it.

Her mother looked at her hands folded in her lap.

‘What did she have to say then?’

‘She told me that they’d wanted to adopt me. That they’d offered you money...’

Her mother snorted. She stood up and began to pace the room.

‘Yes. Rachel couldn’t have children, so they decided they’d try to take mine. Talk about adding insult...’

‘So it’s true then?’

‘Yes. It was her idea. Apparently, they’d been trying until she realised that she couldn’t have children. I think she blamed that on his affair. Don’t let that fool you into believing that he wanted you, Joanna. You should have seen how relieved he was when I said no. I’m sure he didn’t want a constant reminder of me in his life.’

‘And afterwards, did he ever contact you? Did he ever want to see me?’

Her mother shook her head. ‘No. I never heard from him again. When she came to the house that night, hearing his name again...I can’t explain how it made me feel. A part of me was relieved he was dead. I know that sounds terrible. But it meant I didn’t have to worry about running into him somewhere. Even after all these years...’

Joanna watched her mother’s face. She saw her chin tremble before she raised a hand to her mouth to hide it.

‘You have to understand, anything I did, it was for the best, Joanna.’

Tears had welled up in her mother’s eyes. Joanna stood up and put her arms around her. Her mother stifled a sob and she pulled back, searching in the pockets of her cardigan for a tissue with which to dry her tears. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘God, I spent enough time crying over him. I cried for months after. And then you came, the only good thing to come out of it all, and I told myself if it hadn’t happened I wouldn’t have had you and it made it seem better. I know this must be hard, but please don’t hate me for this Joanna. All I’ve ever wanted is the best for you.’

Joanna touched her mother’s hand. ‘I’m not going to pretend it’s all right. I wish you’d stayed and talked to me instead of running off like that. There’s been so many lies, but I think I can see why you did it. It doesn’t make me feel any less cheated. Ever since Rachel Arnold came to the house, I feel like my life’s been based on a lie. I don’t want to be angry with you. It’s not going to undo anything that’s happened, but it might take time to understand...’

Her mother nodded.

‘You have every right to be angry. As long as you don’t hate me, that’s all that matters. I’m sorry I left. I didn’t know how to tell you the truth. And I knew when she came that I had to and I was scared. Scared of what you’d think of me.’

‘I know, but I just need you to be honest with me. If I ask you something, I need you to tell me the truth – not make up lies because you’re afraid of what I might think. I don’t want to go finding things out from Rachel Arnold, I need to hear them from you.’

Joanna’s mother nodded. ‘I’ll try to tell you whatever you need to know,’ she said.

Joanna squeezed her mother’s hand. They had a long way to go, but she felt that they would be all right.

Chapter Fifteen

Oliver closed his client's file and looked at his watch. He hadn't slept since he'd been disturbed by the knocking in the night. Instead of going back to bed, he'd decided to go into the office early, and he was surprised to see that it was still only 11 a.m.

Buoyed up by coffee, he knew that tiredness would eventually strike him, but he'd already got through a day's work, and he was more than prepared for the meetings he had with clients in the afternoon. He sat back and wondered what he would do until lunchtime.

The visit from Carmen Hernandez had unnerved him, expected as it was. It heralded imminent questions. He wondered if he ought to call her to get it over with, but he didn't want to instigate that which he'd been trying to avoid, and so instead he looked in his wallet for the number that Vince Arnold's daughter had scribbled on the flap of a cigarette box and decided to invite her for lunch.

He'd enjoyed the evening they'd had coffee, even if she was preoccupied with questions about her father. He found her striking with that long auburn hair and pale skin. She was not the type of woman that he was usually attracted to, but he couldn't deny that she was beautiful, and it was her contrast to the Hernandez' sisters that he found so appealing. With her he could forget.

He picked up the phone and dialled her number.

She answered after the second ring. Her voice was slightly breathless like she was walking.

'Oliver, how are you? It's nice to hear from you.'

He noted the genuine pleasure in her voice. Clearly, she'd saved his number in her phone and was not one of those people who answered as though they hadn't seen your caller I.D. come up on their screen. He liked her lack of pretentiousness. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was a woman who played coy.

'Yes, I'm good. Look I know this is very short notice, but I was wondering if you were free for lunch today?'

She hesitated, but only for a moment.

'Sure. I'm just on my way to college to hand in an assignment, but I could meet you in about an hour if that's okay?'

'That's perfect. Do you know the Millenium Walk? There's a café called Lemon Jelly. I'll meet you there at say twelve o' clock.'

'That's great, Oliver. I'm looking forward to it.'

Oliver put the phone down and went to the window. It was a bright, chilly morning, and he decided that he would take a walk along the quays before meeting her. It would kill some time and clear his head a bit. The effects of the coffee were beginning to wear off.

He saw Joanna through the window as he sat looking at a menu in the Lemon Jelly café. She was wearing tight grey corduroy trousers, and a black jacket. Her hair hung loose under a grey Russian hat. She smiled and lifted a hand as she saw him inside the glass.

He stood when she approached the table, leaned forward and kissed her cheek, which was cold from the wind.

She smiled and took her coat off.

‘How’ve you been?’

‘Yes. Good. My mother came home yesterday. So, we got a few things sorted.’

She took off her hat, ruffled her hair and put the hat on the chair next to her.

‘I’m sure that was a relief. Did she clear anything up...about your father?’ he said.

Joanna nodded.

‘Maybe, not so much about him, but she explained why she’d done it. And while I can’t say I’m happy about it, I think I understand. She didn’t want to tell me that Vince was my father because she thought I’d go looking for him, and of course I would have.’

‘And what harm would that have done?’

Joanna leaned forward as she explained.

‘My mother had an affair with Vince, but when she became pregnant he didn’t want to know. So she didn’t want him coming back into her life again. I think she never got over him really. She said a part of her is relieved that he’s dead.’

‘That’s some story. Why do you think Rachel Arnold wanted you to know?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe she sees it as some kind of revenge on my mother. Now that her husband’s dead, there’s no risk of bringing us into his life. She had nothing to lose by telling me, but she knew it would put my mother in an awkward situation.’

Oliver shook his head.

‘I’ll never understand women,’ he said.

Just then the waiter appeared to take their order. They looked hurriedly at the menu and ordered two coffees and toasted paninis.

‘So, you’re a student?’ Oliver said, as soon as the waiter walked away.

‘A mature one, yes.’

Joanna smiled.

‘What are you studying?’

‘Photography. I’ve a degree in business, but I wanted to go back and do something I love. Photography’s always been my big passion. Ever since my mother bought me a Kodak camera for my twelfth birthday, I’ve been hooked.’

‘What kind of photographs do you take?’

‘All kinds. I started off with landscapes and people, but now I like to take more abstract pictures – it could be an old shoe, a car tyre, anything...I still love life shots. I don’t mean people posing for the camera, but natural everyday shots. One of my favourite pictures is of a mime artist sitting on a bench counting his money at the end of the day. For me, photography is an art form. I used to try to paint, but I wasn’t very good at it. In fact, I was pretty bad, but taking photographs, it seems to be my thing.’

Oliver sat back and studied her.

‘What do you think of nude shots?’ he said.

She raised an eyebrow, laughed and blushed at the same time, and he wondered if she knew he was teasing her.

‘The human body is beautiful. It’s not my favourite kind of photography, but if you’re interested I can recommend someone who could...’

Oliver laughed loudly drawing the attention of a couple of girls at the next table.

‘Somehow, I don’t think I’d be the ideal subject.’

‘There is no ideal subject,’ she said. ‘Beauty is natural. There was a short film made a few years ago, I don’t know if you’ve seen it. It won an award at Cannes or Sundance or one of those big festivals. I think it was called ‘Undressing My Mother.’ Basically it showed this guy’s Mum naked from all these different angles – it was a reflection on life and aging. Some people thought it was disgusting because this woman was elderly and overweight, but it was really interesting. She told her life story by referring to different parts of her body. It was beautiful.’

He’d been watching her closely as she talked. He liked how her voice became more urgent when she talked about the things that interested her, how she leaned in towards him in her eagerness to convince him of the things she believed in. Energy seemed to emanate from her body as he watched her lips move. He wondered how

she would react if he were to invite her back to the house. Would she turn him down politely, or would she reach for her coat and accompany him out into the cold?

She'd stopped speaking, smiled and reached for her coffee.

'And you...what's your big passion?'

'Suing people,' he said.

She laughed.

'I'm serious. I've been so busy lately; I haven't really had time for a social life. I used to love the movies. I remember a time when I went to the pictures at least once a week. Now if I win a case, it's an adrenalin rush. I guess I need to get out more.'

The waiter brought their food, and they continued to talk. She was good company. She made him laugh. She asked him about his job, and where he came from and seemed genuinely interested in the answers. There was nothing calculated about her, and for the first time in many weeks he felt relaxed in the company of another person.

'Are you married?'

He could tell that she was trying to sound casual, but the colour rose in her face and belied her attempt at disinterest.

'I was,' he said. 'Well, technically I still am.'

'Oh?'

He could see her disappointment, and decided that to arouse her sympathy could be of benefit.

'My wife left me a little over a month ago,' he said.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry.'

She touched his hand and then withdrew. Her touch, however brief, sent small ripples of shock through him.

'It's okay. I don't mind talking about it. In fact, it makes it that little bit more real. Mercedes walked out on me just after Christmas, and I haven't seen her since.'

'Mercedes?'

'Yes. She was...is Spanish.'

'I see.'

A strange expression crossed the girl's face. She looked at the table and then back at him.

'Do you miss her?' she said.

He nodded. 'It's difficult being on your own. We were always fighting, but we had our good times of course. I'm just sorry it ended the way it did – we had a massive row.'

'It hasn't been long, maybe she'll come back?'

He shook his head emphatically.

'No. It's over for good this time.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, I don't want her back. We said things, things that can't be unsaid...and even though it's difficult, I know it'll be better in time. In fact, it already is.'

He smiled and touched her fingers briefly as she had touched his. She looked like she was about to say something, but changed her mind.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was already after one. They'd said a lot in the short time they'd been together.

'I hate to say this, but I'm going to have to get back to the office. I've an appointment at two o'clock,' he said.

'Sure. I hope I haven't asked too many questions. Sometimes, when I get started I forget when to stop.'

They stood and he watched her put her coat on. He paid the bill and when they stepped outside, she put on her Russian hat. He felt terribly tempted to kiss her as they stepped in against the window to avoid the passers-by.

'Well, thanks for lunch,' she said.

'Anytime. We should do it again.'

'I'd like that.'

She smiled. He put his hand on her arm and kissed her cheek. She laughed and straightened her hat, which had slipped sideways as she leaned in towards him.

'I'll call you,' he said.

'Okay.'

He watched her walk away, was able to pick out her hat and her red hair even as the crowd thickened round her. Then he turned and walked in the opposite direction, along the quays and back towards the office, and he knew that it wouldn't be long before he saw her again.

Chapter Sixteen

Joanna directed the head of the halogen lamp over her collection of photographs. The exhibition was to take place in a few days time and she was trying to decide on the sequence of the shots, but her mind kept wandering back to Oliver Molloy and his enigmatic wife. She regretted not telling him about her sighting of Mercedes, but she couldn't think of a way to reveal it without also admitting that she'd been parked outside his house in the early hours of the morning. She'd decided to say nothing, but it weighed on her now like a lie.

Joanna picked up a photograph of a girl in a bridal dress standing by the roadside thumbing a lift. Beside the model stood a battered suitcase, and a sign that hung round the girl's neck bore the message "I don't need to be rescued", the letters scrawled childishly in crayon. She thought about her conversation with Oliver. She'd been disappointed when he'd said that he was married, but he was emphatic about his marriage being over. What was it then that Mercedes had returned for in the middle of the night? Was it a reconciliation that she hoped for, or had she merely returned to taunt him – to take her things and go like the model in her photograph. Joanna placed the picture in the montage on the floor and stood back to admire the overall composition.

'Joanna, what's this?'

The sound of her mother's voice made her jump and she spun round to find her standing only feet behind her. In her hand was the envelope containing the five thousand euro that Rachel Arnold had given her the previous day.

'Jesus, I didn't hear you come in,' Joanna said. She ran a hand through her hair and tried to think how she was going to explain about the money to her mother.

'Where did you get this?' her mother said, taking a bundle of notes from the envelope and waving it in the air.

There was nothing for it but to tell the truth.

'Yesterday, Rachel Arnold called and asked me to go around to the house. She gave me that. I didn't want to take it, but she insisted...said Vince had left it for me in his will. It's...I haven't decided what I'm going to do with it yet.'

As she watched her mother's expression darken, she wished she'd had the foresight to put the money away. She hadn't wanted to tell her about it, not yet, and stupidly she'd left the envelope lying on the dressing table in her bedroom.

‘What? How could you...how could you take his money? Don’t you have any pride?’

Her mother threw the envelope on the sofa near where Joanna stood. She threw the notes on top and they spilled across the seat.

‘I know...look, I told her I didn’t want it...that I couldn’t be bought, but she said it wasn’t like that, and then I thought well why shouldn’t I take it? He never gave me anything. I didn’t have a father to pay me through college like most of my friends. I’ve had to pay my own way. Everything I have, I’ve struggled for, and this...this doesn’t come anything near what I deserve.’

Joanna’s mother looked as though somebody had just slapped her.

‘So that’s what it’s about...money. That’s what it boils down to. Well, I’m sorry you see it that way, Joanna. I’m sorry that I couldn’t send you to University, but social welfare assistance doesn’t exactly cover that. I’ve always done the best I can for us both, but clearly you feel that that wasn’t enough.’

‘No, look, that’s not what I meant.’

Joanna moved towards her mother. She put her hand on her arm but her mother ignored it, and walked away leaving her reaching out to her. When she’d put enough distance between them, her mother spun round.

‘Keep the money. It’s all you’ll ever get from him. You didn’t see him racing round here to give you anything when you were growing up. Okay, you could blame that on me, given the way that I felt about him after, but he could’ve sent a cheque, kept it between us – a contribution towards his daughter’s upbringing, but no, that never occurred to Vince Arnold. He was too selfish to even think of that.’

Joanna picked up the envelope. Her mother stood looking down at the collection of photographs on the floor.

‘Look, I’ll give it back to her. You’re right, I should never have taken it...it was stupid. I just thought...’

‘You thought you deserved it. And you do, you deserve much more than that. I’m sorry, Joanna. It’s just anything to do with that man makes me so angry. Maybe you’re right to say what you did. If I hadn’t been stupid enough to get involved with him in the first place, then you might have had a father to give you all those things.’

‘No, don’t say that. You’re a great mother. I’ve never wanted for anything. Yes, I’ve worked hard for what I’ve got, but I’m proud of that. Proud to be independent, and not to have to rely on anyone, and it’s you that taught me that.’

Joanna's mother sighed. 'Well, keep the money. Do something useful with it. If you bring it back now, she'll only think I sent you.'

Her mother sat into the armchair, all the fight gone out of her. Joanna wanted to change the subject, to talk about something other than Vince Arnold. It wasn't right that he should come between them, and that's all he'd been doing since the moment she heard his name.

They sat in silence for a time. Joanna considered telling her mother about Oliver Molloy, but then thought better of it. After all, her father was the catalyst between them. If it hadn't been for Oliver finding his body, they'd never have met. And besides, her mother might not approve - not that there was anything to approve or disapprove of, she reminded herself, but he was older than her, by ten or maybe twelve years, just like Michael had been. And that had ended badly. No, she wouldn't say anything about Oliver, at least not for now.

Joanna gathered the money that had spilt onto the seat and put it back in the envelope. Her mother had picked up a book and was reading, but she looked up as Joanna left the room.

'Have you eaten?' she said.

'Yes. I had lunch in town.'

Her mother nodded and went back to her reading.

Upstairs, Joanna opened her underwear drawer and put the envelope in the bottom. She could buy a new camera with that much money and still have a sizeable amount left over. She thought about the camera her teacher had shown her during one of the class expeditions. A Canon EOS Mark II. Before, it had been a luxury, something she wouldn't dream of buying, but now she could and she wouldn't have to feel guilty about it. She smoothed the clothes over the envelope and closed the drawer. Vince Arnold had contributed nothing to her life. This was something she wanted badly, and she decided that that was what she would do with the money. Excited by the prospect, she went back downstairs where she spent the rest of the evening arranging her photos for the exhibition.

Chapter Seventeen

Oliver whistled as he turned his key in the lock. He didn't know if it was the girl's buoyant mood that had been catching, or if he had turned a corner somewhere inside his head, but the dread of homecoming that had been so prevalent on recent nights was absent as he pushed open the front door and stepped into the darkened hall.

He reached for the light switch, removed his coat and hung it on the end of the banister. As he sat on the stairs, undid his shoelaces, and kicked off his shoes, he contemplated that it was the first good day he'd had since the night he and Mercedes had argued. Lunch with Joanna had been an antidote to the melancholic state he'd been in that morning. He had returned to the office feeling invigorated despite his lack of sleep and his afternoon appointments had gone well. He didn't know if Joanna was wholly responsible for his improved mood, but he vowed that he would call her again soon.

Oliver kicked his shoes under the stairs and looked in vain for his slippers. He walked in his stocking feet towards the living room, but when he reached the entrance he stopped dead without knowing why. There was something there, a presence blocking the doorway. He reached out a hand and felt nothing, but the feeling did not go away and a cold shiver ran the length of his spine. It was then that he also noticed a smell of smoke and he began to worry that there was a problem with the heating or that he had left something switched on. Thwarting the palpable presence between he and the living room, he stepped through the doorway. Suddenly, he noticed a red ember glowing in the blackness of the room and the acrid smell of smoke became stronger.

'Good evening.'

He fumbled for the light switch. His heart was thumping in his chest and when he turned the light on, stinging his eyes and illuminating the room, the sight of Carmen Hernandez sitting in his armchair smoking a cigarette greeted him.

'What the hell are you doing here? How did you get in?'

'That's not a very nice way to say hello, is it Oliver?'

Carmen tapped her cigarette into an ashtray by her side and crossed her perfectly shaped legs. She dangled a key in her right hand and smiled at him.

'I had it from last time, remember?'

He crossed the room and snatched the key from her fingers.

'What are you doing here? Why didn't you call first?'

‘I did. I called and called, but the phone is always busy. Where is Mercedes? I’ve tried calling her mobile too, but she doesn’t answer.’

She looked around the room as though Mercedes might appear at any moment.

‘I don’t know.’

He spoke quietly. He needed more time to consider how he should play it with Carmen, but he didn’t have time. She was sitting right there in his living room. She was not a woman to get on the wrong side of. He knew that now and so he told himself to appear calm. She could be an asset in all of this.

‘You don’t know?’ She raised one eyebrow. ‘What? Has she left you?’

She got up and began to walk around the room. She stopped a few feet away from him and waited for an answer.

‘What do you think?’ he said.

‘I think yes, but she’ll be back.’

‘Why did you have to tell her?’ he said. ‘Or was that your plan all along? What did you think would happen, that you could take her place, because believe me that will never happen. You’re nothing like Mercedes.’

‘And that’s why you wanted me.’

Carmen’s red lips parted in a smile. ‘If it were me, I’d want to know. Mercedes is my sister. I was thinking of her, no? She deserved to know the truth.’

Oliver felt his anger rising.

‘The only one you were thinking of was yourself,’ he said.

Carmen walked to the window, raised the curtain and looked out into darkness.

‘Does it surprise you that she doesn’t answer your calls? I’d be surprised if she ever spoke to you again. What kind of sister are you anyway? I’m not the only one to blame in all this. You were there, too. In fact you were the instigator of the whole thing. It’s your fault that she’s gone. She’d never have known if it weren’t for you. She’d be here now...’

‘What happened?’

‘She went crazy, that’s what happened. You know Mercedes. She couldn’t believe we’d done that to her. She said that she never wanted to see you again.’

Carmen looked disturbed.

‘She said that?’ she asked.

‘Yes, but don’t worry she didn’t make any excuses for me either.’

‘What did she say about me?’

Oliver shrugged. This was his opportunity to fabricate it. He would give her enough reason to believe that Mercedes's failure to answer her calls was a natural consequence to what had happened.

'She said that she was going away and that I needn't bother trying to contact her, she'd have changed her number. I asked her if she intended to return to Spain, and she said no, that as far as you were concerned she hoped she'd never have to speak to you again. She couldn't believe how you'd betrayed her. She said that she hated you, hated both of us.'

Carmen wasn't smiling now. She pulled on the cigarette, and he could see that her hand was shaking.

'We must find her,' she said.

'What for? What can you tell her that she doesn't already know? Accept it Carmen. She wants nothing more to do with either of us.'

'Look maybe it was stupid, me telling her. If I'd known that she was going to leave like this, I wouldn't have. When I told her she was angry, yes, but I thought she'd come round. You know what we're like. I didn't think she'd...where do you think she's gone?'

Carmen stopped talking to bite on one scarlet painted thumbnail. He was glad to see that he'd unnerved her. And he decided to pull back a little. He didn't want to push her into doing anything drastic.

'I honestly don't know. I've tried calling people, friends, but no one has seen her. Maybe if we give it time, she'll come back like you said.'

Carmen let the curtain fall, and turned from the window. If anyone had seen her through the glass, he thought, they would have mistaken her for Mercedes. She was the same height, had the same tiny frame and dark hair.

'I'm not leaving until I find her,' she said.

Her eyes challenged him and he shrugged.

'I want to find her, too. I've been going mad since she left. I don't know where else to look, to be honest. I've tried all of her close friends. They haven't heard from her, or at least that's what they've said. I suppose if she were with them, she'd have instructed them not to tell me. This is what she wants, isn't it? Us going crazy worrying about her.'

'I'll call them. Maybe they'll tell me.'

‘I don’t think so. You’re as much a part of this as I am. All we can do is hope that she shows up, or at least contacts us.’

Carmen sat down and took her cigarettes from her bag. She held the packet out to him and he shook his head.

‘Where are you staying?’ he asked.

Carmen exhaled; smoke curled from her glossy lips.

‘I thought I might stay here.’

Oliver looked at her. ‘You can’t be serious. I mean, you can’t. What if Mercedes did come back? Can you imagine how she would react if she found you here.’

Carmen laughed.

‘Don’t worry. I’m staying at a hotel,’ she said. ‘You, you are like a clock, so easy to wind.’

She shifted in the chair, and as she did so her skirt rode up to reveal one tanned thigh. He could have her now. He felt like doing it in anger. He could show her who was in control, but he resisted the temptation she posed. It was what she wanted. It was what she’d wanted from the start, but he had preferred Mercedes’s subtleness to her sister’s palpable sexuality.

‘You should go,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t intend staying.’

Carmen tapped her cigarette in the ashtray and stood. Her coat lay across the arm of the chair, and she held the cigarette between her lips as she put it on and buttoned it.

‘I’ll come tomorrow. You can give me whatever numbers you have.’

‘I’m working.’

‘All night?’

She brushed against him as she passed.

‘Look, it’s probably better if you don’t come here. I’ll call you,’ he said.

‘Don’t think you can get rid of me,’ she said. ‘I came to find my sister, and I won’t go until I know where she is.’

He stood at the living room window and watched her retreat. The sound of her heels clacked on the pavement, and he hoped that the neighbours would see her and assume that she were Mercedes. The room smelled of cigarettes. He emptied the ashtray into the fireplace and opened the window. A rush of icy air entered the room and he welcomed it. Even though he’d anticipated her arrival, he was unprepared for

it and it had left him shaken. He wondered how he was going to convince Carmen Hernandez to leave without having seen Mercedes.

Chapter Eighteen

Joanna stood on the pavement, oblivious to the rain, and examined the display in the shop window. There were all kinds of cameras to choose from. She looked at the more reasonably priced ones before her eyes were drawn back to the camera that she'd hankered after from the moment she'd first seen it. The Canon EOS Mark II cost €2,299 according to the luminous, star-shaped price tag attached to the box. Normally such a price tag would make her turn away, but zipped in an inside coat pocket was the envelope with the five thousand euro intact. Her fingers crept inside her coat to trace the outline of the envelope through the lining to ensure that it was still there.

The shop door opened and a man stepped into the street. Warmth spilled from inside only to evaporate almost immediately in the dampness of the day. Joanna stepped forward and put a hand on the door before it had closed behind the man, and suddenly she found herself standing amongst the display cabinets that lined each wall of the shop. Her eyes scanned the cabinet, but she didn't see her camera.

'Can I help you with anything?'

She turned to see a young spiky-haired shop assistant in a blue striped shirt and white tie standing behind her.

'Yes, I'm looking for the Canon EOS Mark II. I saw one in the window,' she said.

The man did a quick scan of the cabinet.

'I'll just check if we have any out the back,' he said.

Joanna nodded and watched him disappear into the store. She had never done anything so impetuous before, partly because she'd not been in a position to do so. When the sales assistant reappeared with a box in his hand her heart began to beat faster. He opened the box and took the camera out to show it to her. He began to tell her about the features, and she nodded. She didn't need a sales pitch – she was already convinced. Ten minutes later she was hurrying down the street in the rain with her prize in a paper bag clutched closely to her chest.

She moved through the throng of Saturday afternoon shoppers, carefully avoiding umbrellas and their owners, in whose hands they bobbed, rising and falling to avoid the passers-by. The rain became more intense and she stepped into a shop doorway for shelter. She watched people hurry past, heads down, and waited for the rain to ease. When the shop door, in whose shelter she was standing, suddenly opened she moved aside not wanting to block the exit. A young woman brushed past, unaware or

unconcerned by her presence. She was wearing a short black skirt and a wine coloured leather jacket, and she had a mobile phone pressed to her ear. She paused in the doorway when she saw the rain. She was just feet from where Joanna stood, so close that she could have reached out and touched her. Joanna immediately recognised her as the woman she had seen at Oliver Molloy's house two nights before.

Having held the phone to her ear for less than a minute, the woman snapped it shut with a look of impatience. She put it in her pocket, took out a box of cigarettes, shook one from the packet and lit up. Then with the cigarette between her lips, she raised the umbrella that dangled from her wrist and stepped out into the rain. Joanna waited for a moment, and then pushed her way through the crowd, and pursued the red umbrella through the busy street. She hurried through the rain, determined not to lose sight of the woman she believed to be Oliver's wife.

At a corner she almost lost her. She stopped and looked both ways before deciding to turn right, and then she caught a glimpse of her again hurrying down a laneway that led them away from the thoroughfare. She followed the woman down the narrow street, aware of the sound of her footsteps echoing the noise made by the other woman's heels, but they were not the only people in the street and she was careful to leave some distance between them.

Suddenly she heard the sound of a mobile phone ringing, a loud electronic tune. The woman in front slowed down, took the phone from her pocket and put it to her ear. She was speaking in Spanish, her words fast and foreign to Joanna's ear. She paused to concentrate on what she was saying and Joanna stopped to look in a shop window. The Spanish woman's voice rose as she talked, and every so often she raised her hand in a gesture that suggested futility. Joanna heard her repeat the same words over and over again and wondered what they meant. She imagined that the person at the other end wasn't listening and that the woman had to re-iterate her point until it finally struck home. While the woman was busy talking, Joanna took the opportunity to look at her, but just as she did so the woman's dark eyes shifted direction and she found herself looking straight at her. The woman's expression was defiant. She held Joanna's gaze for a moment, then turned and walked away. Joanna stared at her reflection in the glass of the shop window and listened to the sound of the Spanish woman's voice fade at the end of the laneway. Then she began to follow her steps once more.

When she emerged into a bigger street, the woman came into view again. She was no longer talking on the phone. Her step had quickened and Joanna struggled to keep up. The rain had stopped and the woman had lowered the red umbrella making it more difficult to track her. Joanna had forgotten about her camera, and now as she thought of it she wondered if she could possibly take it out, set it up and take a picture of the woman without drawing her attention. She could show it to Oliver and ask him...but ask him what? Whether it was his wife? No, it was impossible. She was not following this woman for Oliver's sake. She was doing it to satisfy some fanatical curiosity about the woman who had until recently shared Oliver's life.

Ahead, the Spanish woman crossed the street and disappeared round a corner. Joanna quickened her step so as not to lose sight of her again. When she turned the corner she was just in time to see the woman disappearing into the Westbury Hotel. She slowed down, walked past the hotel and stopped a few feet away. She wondered if she was a guest at the hotel, or if she was meeting someone there. Perhaps the woman had spoken to Oliver since they'd had lunch. He could be waiting for her now in the hotel lounge to talk about a possible reconciliation. Joanna took out her phone and called his number. It rang and rang, but there was no answer, and she hung up and wondered if he were inside the hotel with his wife, but she didn't dare enter to find out.

She turned and walked back the way she'd come. When she'd reached the car, she called Oliver's number again. She wasn't sure what she would say if he answered, but seeing the woman for a second time made her feel compelled to set the record straight. This time the number was busy and she took hope in the fact. Perhaps Mercedes was meeting someone at the hotel, but it wasn't Oliver. She should have gone in and ordered a coffee to find out. She was tempted to go back, but she decided that instead she would go to Oliver's house. If he were out, then he wouldn't know that she had been. And if he were home, she would find some way to bring up the subject of his wife.

Chapter Nineteen

Oliver was at the bottom of the stairs when the doorbell rang. He stopped dead. Carmen had already phoned several times, and he knew from the voice messages she'd left that she wasn't happy. That unhappiness had probably been upgraded to a smouldering rage the moment he'd taken the phone off the hook, and now she was out there, nothing but the front door and a few feet of hallway separating them.

The bell went again. Oliver remained perfectly still, thankful that he'd confiscated the key from Carmen the night before. The net curtain on the hall window rendered him invisible from the outside, he just hoped that it wouldn't occur to her to crouch down and look through the letterbox, or to cup her hands and put her face against the glass. He was ready to move if she should do so, with one swift movement he would wedge himself again the hall door out of sight.

He was barely breathing when the figure outside moved, but what he saw from his place at the foot of the stairs was not the svelte form of Carmen Hernandez descending the driveway, but Joanna Lacey striding out the gate with a white paper bag clutched in her hand. She was almost at her car when he opened the door.

'Joanna.'

She turned as he called her name and her face broke into a smile.

'I'd just given up,' she said.

'Sorry I was in the middle of something, please, come in.'

He stood back and opened the door wider. He caught the scent of her perfume as she passed, a fresh citrus scent that awakened his senses.

'I hope you don't mind me dropping by,' she said. 'I tried to call, but the phone was busy.'

'I took it off the hook. Mercedes's family keep calling wanting to know if I've heard from her. She hasn't contacted them since she left, but there's really nothing I can tell them.'

He wasn't sure why he told the truth, but it seemed for once like the easiest option.

'You haven't heard from her then?'

Oliver shook his head. 'It's her way of punishing me. She thinks she'll drive me mad with worry not knowing where she is.'

The girl opened her mouth to speak, then hesitated and started again.

'Look, there's something I should have told you,' she said. 'I saw your wife. I saw Mercedes.'

Oliver sat heavily into one of the armchairs.

‘What do you mean? You don’t know her, how could you have seen her?’

‘A few nights ago, I couldn’t sleep so I was driving around. You’d given me your address, and I had a lot on my mind. I’d been to see Rachel Arnold and she told me...well, don’t worry about that now...the thing is, I was parked outside debating whether to come in or not, it was late, after two o’ clock. A taxi pulled up and a woman got out. The taxi driver waited for her. Maybe she figured you wouldn’t answer. Anyway, she knocked twice, and when she got no reply she got back in the cab and left. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I was afraid you’d think I was crazy thinking about calling so late. It was only when I saw her, Mercedes, that I realised how strange it would look.’

Oliver looked at the ground, his hands clasped together.

‘This woman, what did she look like?’

‘She had dark hair to her shoulders. I’d say she was in her late-twenties, maybe early thirties, slim. She wasn’t exactly dressed for the weather.’

Oliver nodded. ‘It sounds like Mercedes.’

‘I’m sure it was. You see I saw her again today in the city centre. I was walking just behind her and I heard her speaking Spanish on the phone, so I knew then for sure. That’s why I’ve come...I wanted to tell you. She’s staying at a hotel.’

‘Which hotel?’

‘The Westbury, at least, that’s where she went. I suppose she could have been meeting someone there.’

Oliver was silent.

‘What will you do?’ she asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, now that you know where she is, don’t you want to talk to her?’

‘No, I don’t. Frankly, I don’t care if I never see her again. Okay, I admit I was worried, but now that you’ve seen her, I don’t have to worry. We know - I know - that she’s okay. There’s really no point in talking. We’ve said all we had to say.’

Joanna smiled. He thought she looked relieved. He was amused at the idea that this girl had been sitting outside his house in the early hours of the morning. What was it she had wanted, a chat, or something else? The fact that she’d seen Carmen at the house was perfect. He couldn’t have planned it any better. She had no reason now to question him about Mercedes. If he needed, she could be an alibi, a witness to

the fact that Mercedes was still in the country, that she hadn't come to harm. Of course, the one person he'd have liked her to tell such information to was Carmen, and that was impossible. He had yet to think of a way of persuading Carmen to leave without having spoken to her sister.

'Now that you're here, would you like a coffee or something?'

Joanna smiled. 'Tea, if you have it.'

When he left the room, he felt lighter. He glanced over his shoulder into the living room and saw Joanna taking a box from the paper bag she'd been carrying. He took out his mobile phone and switched it on. Almost immediately it blipped to tell him that he'd received four calls from Carmen Hernandez. She'd also sent him a text message that simply read 'Where r u? Call ASAP.' To avoid having her turn up again unannounced, he sent her a text message explaining that he was tied up in court all day, and that he'd call her first thing in the morning. He hoped that it was enough to keep her away. As soon as he'd sent it, he turned the phone off.

'I've wanted one of these ever since I first saw one.'

Joanna held up a new camera for his inspection as he carefully placed a tray on the coffee table before her.

'I bought it with the money that Rachel Arnold gave me. I figured I deserved it. After all it's not like he ever gave me anything. Everything I've got, my car, my education, I paid for myself. I don't mind. If anything, I'm proud of the fact. I like to be independent. But this, this was something I really wanted, and I thought why not? It's no compensation for any of the lies I was told, but it's something. My mother wasn't happy when she found out about the money, but she came round eventually when I told her how I felt.'

Oliver sat on the sofa next to her.

'How are things between you now?' he asked.

'Okay. I think we understand each other better.'

When Joanna looked up, she seemed suddenly shy. There was a faint colour in her cheeks that hadn't been there before and he could tell that she was aware of his proximity. He reached for the camera and she gave it to him.

'What do I press?' he said.

Joanna leaned over to show him what to do and her hair fell across his hand. She brushed it behind her ear and smiled. He leaned back, pointed the camera towards her

and her face was illuminated momentarily by the flash. When he handed the camera back to her, she laughed.

‘It’s terrible. The lighting’s all wrong.’

‘What do you mean? It’s perfect,’ he said.

She shook her head and laughed again. There hadn’t been laughter in the house for a long time, and the sound of it warmed his insides. Joanna played around with the settings and then took a shot of him. When he looked at it, he saw the dark shadows beneath his eyes, the result of too many sleepless nights. He needed a haircut, too, he thought. He was beginning to look old. In his face, he could see a similarity to his father that he was sure hadn’t been there before. He didn’t like it and he turned away.

‘Is that how I look to you?’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing, I’m just being stupid. Sometimes, when I look in the mirror these days, I don’t know who’s looking back at me.’

‘You’ve been through a difficult time. No matter what you say, it can’t have been easy, your marriage ending.’

‘No, but it’s time to move on. I want to feel happy again. I want to be able to laugh without feeling guilty.’

Joanna shrugged.

‘You shouldn’t feel guilty. Sometimes things don’t work out. It’s nobody’s fault.’

He put his hand on hers.

‘It’s nice having you here,’ he said.

He held her gaze, aware of the warmth of her hand beneath his. She didn’t pull it away, and he caressed it with his thumb.

‘I guess we’ve both been through a difficult time lately.’

Joanna nodded.

He leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. She put her hand on his arm, not to push him away, but to pull him closer.

‘It’s strange. We wouldn’t have met if it weren’t for my father, for what happened,’ she said.

He stroked her face. ‘Well, let’s hope that’s one good thing to come out of all of this,’ he said.

He kissed her again, no doubt in his mind now that she would stay the night.

Chapter Twenty

Joanna was woken by the sound of someone banging at the front door. She turned over and reached out to switch on the bedside lamp, but instead she found warm flesh, and she remembered that she was not at home, and that Oliver Molloy was lying next to her.

‘There’s someone at the door,’ she whispered.

Oliver moaned something unintelligible. Then suddenly sat up straight.

‘Don’t make a sound,’ he said.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, and groped on the floor for his slippers.

‘It’s her, isn’t it?’ Joanna said. ‘It’s Mercedes.’

Oliver put a finger to his lips. He’d located his dressing gown on top of a pile of clothes on a chair and was shrugging into it.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘She’s not getting in.’

‘Doesn’t she have a key?’

Joanna sat upright at the thought, ready to pull her clothes on in case Oliver’s wife were to let herself in and make her way upstairs.

‘No. No she didn’t take it,’ he said.

He was at the window. He’d lifted a corner of the curtain and was peering down into the garden.

‘I can’t see anything,’ he said.

He dropped the curtain and walked passed the bed to the door.

‘Where are you going?’ Joanna said.

‘It’s okay, just stay here.’

Joanna pulled the covers round her. The room was in total darkness and she had difficulty making anything out. What was he doing, she wondered. She hoped he didn’t intend answering the door. What if the woman suspected that there was someone there and forced her way upstairs. Joanna’s boots were in the living room. She should’ve brought them upstairs, she thought, but then how was she to know that someone would come calling in the night. What was it with this woman and her late-night visits anyway? Surely she could contact him during the day. Why hadn’t she tried to make contact with him since that last night? Joanna listened for any sounds from downstairs, but she heard none. A few minutes later, Oliver re-appeared in the doorway.

‘It’s okay. She’s gone,’ he said.

‘Did you answer her?’

‘No.’

She could just make out his outline as he took off the dressing gown and threw it on the chair. Cold crept beneath the covers as he lifted them and climbed in beside her. He moved close and put his arm around her.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ he said.

‘It’s not your fault.’

Joanna was quiet. She lay there and thought about the woman in whose bed she now lay. Oliver’s breath was warm on her skin, slightly sour as she knew her own was. He kissed her shoulder and though she wanted to, she couldn’t bring herself to respond.

‘Will you contact her?’ she said.

‘I don’t know.’

His hand brushed her right breast.

‘Are you sure it’s over?’

The mattress sank as he moved. He was leaning on one elbow looking down at her. Her hair was caught beneath his arm, but she didn’t complain. She just lay there and waited for his answer.

‘Yes. It’s definitely over. Believe me, you don’t need to worry about that.’

He leaned over and kissed her. She kissed him back, and tried to forget about the woman at the door. Briefly, it occurred to her that she hadn’t contacted her mother. She hoped that she hadn’t noticed that she’d not returned home. She would be worried. It wasn’t like Joanna to stay out all night. Oliver began to touch her then and she put everything out of her mind and gave herself up to his touch.

She woke an hour later needing to go to the bathroom. Silently, she slipped out of bed and made her way across the landing. A full moon lay beyond the frosted glass of the bathroom window and illuminated the room in its milky light. The tiled floor was like ice beneath her bare feet. Joanna sat on the edge of the bath and sent a text message to her mother to say that she was spending the night at a friend’s. On the back of the bathroom door, there was a pink bathrobe hanging from a hook. She guessed that it belonged to Mercedes, and she took it down and held it to her face before slipping it on. It smelled of lavender. She pulled a cord to turn on a short fluorescent light above the mirror at the sink, and blinked until her eyes adjusted. In a cabinet to the right of the mirror, there was moisturiser, nail varnish remover, hand

cream, things that clearly belonged to Mercedes. Joanna wondered why she hadn't taken them with her. Had she left in such haste? A loofah hung in the shower. She was sure that if she looked closely enough, she would see Mercedes's long dark hairs clogging the bath. She closed the cabinet door, and wondered if Oliver Molloy was truly over his wife.

She turned out the light, opened the bathroom door and stood in the landing listening. There wasn't a sound from the bedroom, and she crept quietly down the stairs. In the living room it was dark. She tried to remember the layout of the room, but bumped against an armchair as she tried to negotiate her way towards the small lamp that she knew stood upon a table next to the sofa. She fumbled for the switch, her eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness. When she turned it on, the room was as they had left it. Her boots lay on the floor near the sofa, and her camera was on the coffee table, forgotten. She pulled her boots on. They made no noise on the carpeted floor. She picked up her camera and turned it on. There was the picture of Oliver and the one that he had taken of her. She looked around the room. It was a nice room. She got up and began to walk around, stopping to look at things. She noticed that there weren't any photos. Had he taken them away? Was it too difficult just to look at her? On a sideboard there was an old music box. She put her camera down and picked it up. She opened it and a ballerina began to twirl accompanied by the sound of tinkling music. She closed the lid and the music stopped.

'What are you doing?'

She jumped at the sound of his voice. He stood framed in the doorway in his dressing gown.

'My God, you scared me,' she said.

She was still holding the music box. She didn't like the way he was looking at her, like he'd caught her doing something she shouldn't.

'I couldn't sleep, so I just came downstairs. I hope I didn't wake you.'

He glanced at the music box in her hands.

'I don't sleep very well these days,' he said.

She nodded. She wanted to cross the room and put her arms around him, but something stopped her. He seemed different, cold. Maybe she should have stayed in bed instead of walking around the house at night. Then she realised that she was wearing Mercedes's robe. She looked down at it, and began to apologise.

‘I’m sorry. You must’ve thought...I just found it hanging on the bathroom door. It was cold. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have...’

Oliver shrugged.

‘It doesn’t make any difference,’ he said.

He scratched his head.

‘I thought I might get something to drink. Would you like some hot chocolate?’

‘Sure, that would be great.’

She felt uncomfortable as she watched him disappear into the kitchen. She wished that she wasn’t wearing Mercedes’s robe. What was she thinking? She went upstairs. In the bedroom the aftermath of their lovemaking still hung in the air. She pulled on her jeans and jumper and scoured the floor for a missing sock. She found it finally half-hidden beneath the bed. She could hear him in the kitchen rattling mugs, opening and closing cupboard doors. She looked around the room to make sure that she hadn’t forgotten anything and made her way downstairs.

He looked surprised when she appeared in the kitchen fully dressed. He put the mugs on the counter-top.

‘Are you leaving?’ he said.

‘No, I just...it was cold. But I will if you want me to.’

He smiled.

‘No, I don’t want you to leave. I’m sorry if I seemed a bit distant. I guess I’ve become used to being here alone.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘What for?’

‘The robe, it was stupid. I didn’t think.’

‘It took me a little by surprise.’

He sat down on a stool and sipped his hot chocolate. Joanna sat next to him.

‘Maybe we should take that camera of yours somewhere, give you a chance to use it on something more scenic than this face.’

He pulled a face as he said it and Joanna laughed, relieved that some of the tension seemed to have left him.

‘I wouldn’t mind taking some shots in the mountains if you’re game. I didn’t get to take any pictures in the snow, and it hasn’t melted there yet, what do you think?’

‘Sure. I hope you’re wearing the right kind of shoes for it though. It can be pretty dangerous up there.’

She caught sight of something in his face as he said it, a remnant of his earlier unease. She would have to be careful around him, she thought. It was clear that despite what he said, he wasn't over the break-up of his marriage and she didn't want to do anything to jeopardise the fragile link that had been forged between them.

Chapter Twenty-One

Oliver drove with caution as the road wound gradually uphill. He had been there at the beginning of the freeze and he knew of the tendency of the ice to linger on the mountain roads. Before they had left the house, he had sent Carmen a text message to say that he would contact her in the evening time. Then he had switched off his phone before she could call him.

He had been quick-thinking the night before when he had sent Carmen a message whilst she'd stood outside the door. He'd said that he wasn't at home and that he would contact her the next day. He wasn't sure if she would believe it. He wouldn't have believed it, but it had worked and she'd left. He imagined that she was fuming by now. It wouldn't do for her to return while Joanna was there, and so his suggestion to make this dawn trip was as much a way of avoiding Carmen, as a means of spending time with Joanna.

The sky had not yet become light. The beams of his headlights illuminated the sides of the road and the dirty snow that lay in clumps there. Trees nuzzled darkly in the fields, still in the frosty air. They travelled in silence. Joanna had said that she wasn't an early morning person, and he was lost in his own thoughts. As he drove the winding roads, he relived his last journey with Mercedes. She had loved the mountains, the vast landscape that seemed to go on into eternity, and he felt that it was right that he'd taken her there on their last trip together.

When they'd reached the car park at the Gap, the sky had become light. Oliver switched off the engine and they sat there in silence looking out at the snowy ruins that had once been an old church. He leaned over and kissed her.

'Ready?' he asked.

Joanna nodded, and zipped her coat up past her throat.

The icy air assaulted them when they stepped from the car. Joanna refused to wear gloves. She said that it was too difficult to operate the camera and she didn't like the restriction. Oliver watched her carefully strap the camera across her shoulder and chest and then his eyes strayed to a wooded area in the distant hills.

'Hang on, I've got something that will help,' he said.

He walked round to the boot, opened it and pulled out two collapsible hiking poles.

'We can use these to test the ground, make sure we don't walk into any holes,' he said.

Joanna took one of the poles from him and turned it in her hands.

‘It looks like they’ve been well-used.’

Oliver slammed the boot closed, opened out a pole and showed her how to use it.

‘I used to come up here a lot. I was involved in a hill-walking group. I came here alone too, when I got to know the terrain. There’s nothing more exhilarating than being up in those hills and feeling the complete isolation of it.’

He breathed in the icy air and scanned the hills around them.

‘Do you think you’re up for this?’

Joanna smiled. ‘I haven’t done much walking, but I’ll give it a try. Just go easy on me, okay?’

‘Don’t worry. We won’t do anything you’re not able for. Not today anyway.’

They started walking. Oliver kept ahead of her, using the pole to test the ground.

‘Walk in my footprints,’ he said.

His words reached her on the barren air.

They were moving gradually uphill. Occasionally he paused and looked over his shoulder to make sure that she was following. Their feet crunched through the powdery snow. Every now and then the pole sank and he veered in another direction, but as soon as it was safe to do so he guided them back to the original trail, one that was now visible only in his mind. The snow was loose on the hills. Lack of human traffic had kept it that way, not like the hard compacted snow that had settled in the city during the freeze. Small powdery clouds of it exploded from the tips of his boots as he made his way forward. The only sound was the muted movements of their feet, and then the clicking of Joanna’s camera – the flash illuminating the not quite-light countryside.

When he looked back she had fallen several metres behind. Crouched low in her light coloured jacket she had become almost part of the landscape. A stag had emerged from the underbrush. He was just in time to see it disappear in a hurry; its brown body distinct in the brilliance of its surroundings.

‘Did you get it?’ he shouted.

‘Yeah.’

Her face was flushed. In her haste to catch up with him she forgot to use the pole and she almost stumbled on a rock hidden beneath the surface. She grabbed her camera and held it above waist level as she steadied herself, and laughed.

‘This was a great idea,’ she said.

He waited for her to catch up. She showed him the picture of the stag, and then she put her hand on his arm and reached up to kiss him.

‘Thanks for bringing me here. It’s beautiful.’

‘Come on, we’d better keep moving before we freeze to death.’

He wasn’t sure why he’d answered her so brusquely. Maybe it was the fact that the cluster of trees in the distance was calling to him, and he was determined to reach them before she asked him to turn back. He picked up speed. He could hear her walking in his footprints – the faint laboured sound of her breath. A part of him said that he was crazy to bring her here. He could have taken her somewhere else, to another area in the mountains. He couldn’t think why he had decided to do it, except that he felt the need to purge himself of the past.

She stopped several times along the way to take pictures of the landscape. When he realised that she was no longer close behind him, he paused to wait for her. Almost as soon as she had closed the distance between them, he pushed on.

‘I think I need to stop,’ she shouted.

She had fallen behind again. When he turned he saw her struggling up the incline, leaning heavily on the pole. His eyes scanned the wooded area at the top of the hill. It wasn’t far now. He could make it there in less than ten minutes.

‘I’ll tell you what, wait here. I’ll go on ahead and make sure it’s safe.’

Joanna’s breath was coming fast. She crouched down and dusted the snow off a boulder with her bare hand, then shook it from her fingers.

‘I’ll be okay in a few minutes,’ she said.

She sat on the boulder, and steadied her camera to take a picture. As Oliver walked away he heard the click of the camera and felt rather than saw the flash of light on his back - a lone man walking toward the woods.

As he neared the crest of the hill, he slowed down. The woods were dark, foreboding, the branches so closely entwined that they had kept the snow out in places and the forest floor remained as it had before the ice had come, a myriad of fallen branches and dead leaves. Once he’d entered the woods, he stopped to look back. He saw Joanna sitting on the boulder staring out across the snow-covered fields. It was silent amongst the trees, the kind of silence that was unnerving. He stood there and stared into the vast expanse of woodland. He knew what lay deep in the forest. It was what had called to him and what prevented him from going any further. He stood paralysed at the edge of the trees unable to progress, but unwilling to turn back. He

was standing there willing himself to enter the shadows when he thought he saw something moving amongst the trees. He wanted to call out, but he didn't. What if there was someone there? He felt cold, colder than he had in the open fields. It was a different kind of cold, the kind that reaches inside you with icy fingers and almost stops your heart.

'Mercedes.'

He whispered her name, a hushed sound that was lost in the whispering of the trees. He took a few steps deeper into the woods. This wasn't the time to come here, he thought. Not with the girl waiting out there. Why had he brought her? Perhaps because he'd feared coming to this place alone. He was afraid of what he might meet amongst those trees. He turned and hurried back the way he'd come. Joanna was standing beside the boulder. She was looking in his direction. He quickened his step as he approached her.

'We'll go back. It's too dangerous up there.'

He led the way back down the hillside. She was quiet and he wondered if she'd picked up on his mood.

'I know a nice pub where we can stop for lunch,' he said.

'That would be great. I think I'm never going to thaw out.'

The crunch of her boots was a comfort as she descended the hill close behind him. It was early yet, and he didn't intend returning to the house until the evening time, when he would finally have to face Carmen Hernandez.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Joanna stood at the gate and watched, as the taillights of Oliver Molloy's car grew fainter in the distance. The light was on in the living room, and she could see the television flashing through a chink in the curtains. He hadn't asked her to stay again that night. He told her that he had an important meeting with a client in the morning and he had to read over the case. She was a little disappointed, but there were times during their trip that day when it seemed as though he wasn't there and she knew that he was thinking about Mercedes. It would take time for him to forget.

Joanna stepped into the hall. She threw her keys on the table by the door, took off her coat and hung it on the end of the banister.

'Mam?' she called.

'I'm up here. I'll be down in a minute.'

Her mother's voice reached her from somewhere upstairs. She went into the living room, sat by the fire and waited for her to appear. On the journey home in the car, she'd made the decision to tell her mother about Oliver. She didn't want any more secrets between them. She wasn't sure how her mother would react to the fact that Vince Arnold had been the catalyst between them, but there was nothing she could do about that. They could have met some other way, but they didn't.

When she heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs, she wondered how she was going to broach the subject. She sat up straighter in the chair, then fluffed the cushion and leaned back again. She didn't want her words to sound rehearsed. She wanted it to come out casually. She knew from experience how these conversations could escalate.

'There you are. I was worried until I got your message last night. There's some dinner in the microwave if you want to heat it. I didn't know what time you'd be home.'

Her mother picked up the remote control and started to flick through the T.V. channels.

'That's okay. I've eaten.'

Joanna sat looking at the pictures that zapped by on the screen. Her mother leant forward in her chair to look at the clock.

'It must be time for the news,' she said.

'Do you want tea?' Joanna asked.

'Yes, I'll have some if you're making it.'

Joanna was glad of the opportunity to leave the room. When she returned with the tea, her mother was watching the news. Joanna put the mug on the table beside her.

‘Do you know, there’s still snow in the mountains,’ she said.

Her mother nodded. ‘I could see it from the upstairs windows.’

‘It’s deep. I was up there today. I took some great pictures.’

Her mother looked at her, surprised.

‘You didn’t drive?’

‘No, I went with someone else. He drove.’

‘Is that where you were last night, with this someone else?’

Joanna smiled. ‘Yes.’

‘Did you meet him at the photography club?’

‘No. I’m not sure how to tell you this, but he’s the man who discovered my father’s body. The man who was out walking that morning.’

Her mother paused with the mug to her lips.

‘His name is Oliver. I met him at the funeral. He gave me his number and we’ve met up a few times. He’s really nice.’

Joanna spoke quickly; she didn’t want to give her mother an opportunity to interrupt. Her mother sipped her tea, and put the mug down.

‘Is he married?’

‘No. Well, yes he was but he’s separated now.’

‘Do you know that for certain?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why, because he told you?’

‘No, because I’ve been to his house. Do you think he’d have brought me to the house if he were still living with his wife?’

Joanna was angry. Her mother knew nothing about the situation. She had no right to question her like this. She was sorry she’d decided to say anything.

‘Look, just because he found Vince that doesn’t mean you have to take an instant dislike to him.’

‘Dislike? I don’t dislike him. I haven’t even met him. It’s you I’m worried about, Joanna. You get taken in by people sometimes.’

‘What? I made one bad judgement and now you think I’m likely to be taken in by every man that comes along. God, you must think I’m naïve.’

Joanna stood up and paced the room.

‘Joanna, you’re taking this the wrong way. I just don’t want to see you getting hurt again.’

‘If I get hurt, that’s my problem.’

She was glad that she hadn’t mentioned anything about Mercedes. If her mother knew how recently they had separated she would definitely have something to say about it.

‘How old is he?’

‘I don’t know. He’s older than me. I don’t see what difference it makes.’

‘These men have a lot more experience than you Joanna. They know how to manipulate people.’

‘Like Vince Arnold, you mean. You think everyone’s like Vince Arnold, don’t you? That’s why you were so against Michael. Now I understand. All the time it was Vince that you were thinking about. Well, Oliver isn’t my father, Mam. Sure, things mightn’t work out. You take that risk in any relationship. I wish you could just give people a chance.’

She stopped pacing and stood in front of the television, blocking her mother’s view.

‘I can see why you might think that. Of course, it made me cautious, but this isn’t about me, it’s about you Joanna. It took you so long to get over Michael. I know he wasn’t married, but he was too old for you. You need someone your own age.’

‘I prefer older men, that’s not a crime, is it? They have more to say. They don’t play stupid games like the guys my age. I don’t set out to meet them, it just happens.’

Joanna sat in the armchair again. She could feel her mother’s eyes upon her, but she refused to return her gaze.

‘I’m not against you, Joanna. I just don’t want to see you get hurt. Don’t rush into anything with this man. Take time to get to know people before making any decisions about them.’

‘That’s what I’ve been telling you.’

Joanna stopped chewing on the corner of her nail and looked up.

Her mother smiled.

‘Be careful. That’s all I’m saying.’

Joanna sat back in the chair and drank her tea, which was by now almost cold.

‘Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, Rachel Arnold called. She wanted to know how you were.’

‘What did you tell her?’

Her mother shrugged. 'I told her you were fine. She said she'd like you to give her a call.'

'Would it bother you?'

'You know I'm not overjoyed about any of this, Joanna, but if you want to call her, if you think that somehow it will help, then go ahead. I won't stand in your way.'

Joanna nodded and took a sip of the cold tea.

She didn't say if she would call Rachel Arnold, but she knew already that she would. Her mother had turned up the volume on the television and was watching the dark-haired weather woman in the tight leather dress forecasting a night of sub zero temperatures once again. She sat back and wondered what it was that Rachel Arnold wanted to speak to her about. Whatever it was, it could wait until the next day. She didn't want to think about anything right now. She simply wanted to sit by the fire and let the recent memories of the time she'd spent with Oliver Molloy wash over her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Oliver saw Carmen as soon as he entered the lobby. She was sitting at a table reading a magazine, a glass of red wine in front of her. She had probably seen him already and had averted her eyes from the entrance as soon as she'd seen him step inside the revolving door. He imagined her crossing her legs into the pose in which she now sat, her whole demeanour an affectation for his benefit. She flicked through the pages of the magazine with disinterest and failed to look up until he'd spoken.

'Sorry, I'm late,' he said.

Carmen paused, one perfectly manicured fingernail poised to turn the page.

'Do you have the numbers?'

'Yes. I've contacted most of them already, but there are a few people that you could call.'

Oliver took a notebook from his coat pocket and flicked through the pages. Carmen had closed the magazine and he could feel her eyes on his face as he pretended to scan the numbers.

'Where were you last night?'

He was surprised by the even way in which she asked him. He'd been bracing himself for fireworks as soon as they'd met. He watched her face for any sign of suppressed anger that might threaten to erupt, and was surprised to see none. This was an impressive display of self-control on Carmen's part.

'I stayed at my father's. I've stayed there a few times recently. It's more for myself than for him I suppose. I can't stand to be at home when she isn't.'

Carmen played with her wine glass.

'You miss her then?' she said.

'You know Mercedes. The place is dead without her.'

The waiter came and Oliver asked Carmen if she wanted a drink. She refused. Her glass was almost full, and so he ordered a Guinness for himself, and wondered what lay behind Carmen's cool façade. The Guinness came and he took a frothy sip. At first he hadn't intended staying, but it had occurred to him that Carmen could be of use. And since she wasn't being volatile he thought that it might be a good opportunity to show his willingness to unite in their quest to find Mercedes. It would be the only way to placate her.

He gave her the names and numbers of a few people that he knew Mercedes had lost touch with a long time ago. She would learn nothing from them and they were

unlikely to bother asking questions. There was another reason why he decided to stay and share a drink with Carmen; he felt that he ought to take advantage of her seemingly genial mood. That morning he had had another call from the human resources manager in Mercedes's job. This time the woman had left a message to say that she didn't want to pressurise Mercedes at such a difficult time, but they needed some indication as to when she might return. The call had given him an idea, which could strengthen his alibi should the police investigate Mercedes's disappearance, but in order for it to work he had to persuade Carmen to help him out. If she agreed, she would also make herself his unwitting accomplice.

'I got a letter from Mercedes's job today, they said they wouldn't keep her position open for her any longer if they didn't hear from her soon,' he said.

'She hasn't been at work?'

Carmen paused with the glass halfway to her damson-stained lips.

'No. Not for weeks, it seems. I was thinking, maybe you could call them. You sound just like her. I don't want her to lose her job, not because of me, of what we've done.'

'But why, why wouldn't she have turned up for work? Something's happened to her. It must have.'

Carmen bit her thumb distractedly. 'I think we should call the police,' she said.

Oliver shook his head.

'I don't think that's necessary, Carmen. Don't you think I'd have called them if I did? I know Mercedes. She's seething. She's hurt and she's angry, but that's all. The thing is she hadn't been in work for a week before she left. She was stressed. She told them that she needed some time off; that your father had been taken ill. For some reason, she hasn't called them since. Maybe, it just totally slipped her mind. Maybe she doesn't intend coming back. But whatever the reason, we've got to keep her job open for her. So I was thinking that maybe you should call them, just to give her more time. You could call from your mobile. They'd think you were Mercedes's calling from Barcelona. You sound just the same.'

Carmen shook her head.

'I don't know, Oliver. It could just make things worse. What if she calls them and they discover it was all lies? Then they will fire her for sure, no?'

‘It’s a risk. I know that, but I think we should do what we can to keep it open for her. Mercedes is smart. If they manage to contact her, she’ll go along with it. I know her.’

Carmen nodded and cradled her wine glass in both hands, the stem dangling between her fingers. She eyed him over the rim.

‘I suppose you hate me. You think this is all my fault?’

‘I wish you hadn’t done what you did, but it can’t be undone. We just have to get on with it.’

He wondered how many drinks Carmen had had. Her eyes were slightly glassy, glittering like black gems amidst the whites of her eyes. He often thought that she possessed an almost masculine aggressiveness. He pitied the man that would become involved in a power struggle with Carmen. He was unlikely to escape unscathed, and with that in mind he knew that she would make a better ally than an adversary.

Her glass was almost empty. She was watching him closely, and he waited for her to speak.

‘I never saw you as a match,’ she said. ‘I thought Mercedes would marry a Spanish boy. There was someone...’

She said it to provoke him. But rather than take the bait, he leaned in towards her.

‘Naturally. We all have our history,’ he said. ‘But tell me about yours.’

Carmen laughed and swirled the liquid in the end of her glass.

‘Ah. My history. My history is not so interesting,’ she said.

She put her head back and drained the glass. Her neck was long and slender.

‘I doubt that.’

Oliver waited, watched her smile into the empty glass. Her teeth were perfectly white between her wine-stained lips, but Carmen was not beautiful. Her mouth was too wide, her lips too full. She was an imperfect model of her sister and she knew it.

‘You made the right choice with Mercedes,’ she said.

‘There was never a question about choice.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

He watched her face, saw her eyes flash with annoyance. She leaned forward in her chair. He could see the tanned flesh of her breasts as she crossed her arms beneath them, accentuating her sexuality. Every move Carmen made was calculated. He had never met a woman so aware of her body and the power it yielded.

‘I saw the way you looked at me. You’re doing it now. You can’t help yourself. You’re a man.’

Oliver laughed.

‘Do you think every man wants you?’

She shrugged.

‘At first yes, then they want something else. Something new.’

‘And what do you want?’

‘I want another drink. How about you?’

She signalled to the waiter nearby.

‘I should probably get going. I’ve a meeting with a client in the morning.’

‘Oh, one more won’t hurt. You don’t want me drinking alone here, do you?’

Oliver smiled as he stood up.

‘I don’t think you’d be alone for too long, Carmen.’

‘No? Then maybe we should go to my room. We could get them to send our drinks up.’

She rose, walked round the table and stood too close to him. She put a finger to her lips and swayed slightly.

‘Don’t worry. This time I won’t tell anyone,’ she said.

Oliver smiled. He could smell her perfume, the same perfume that Mercedes had worn and he remembered how the scent of it had lingered in the garden that night when he thought that Mercedes had returned.

‘If it weren’t for Mercedes, I’d be tempted, but the most important thing now is to get her back.’

Carmen reached up and he held her wrists to prevent them from snaking round his neck.

‘I think you’ve had a little too much to drink. You’ll regret it in the morning.’

‘Je ne regrette rien.’

Carmen swayed and he put out a hand to steady her. He walked her to the lift and when the doors opened he guided her inside.

‘Which floor is it?’

‘I’ll only tell you if you come, too,’ she said.

‘I’ll take you to your room, but then I’m going home.’

They stood in the corridor and Carmen searched in her bag for the key. As soon as she’d swiped it in the lock and pushed the door open Oliver said goodnight, kissed her

lightly on the cheek and made his way towards the lift. He had to convince Carmen that he was serious about finding Mercedes and sleeping with her, tempted as he was, would not do that.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘I didn’t think you’d come.’

Joanna followed Rachel Arnold into the living room. There was a door into another room, which she hadn’t noticed on previous visits. It was open and through it she could see a heavy mahogany desk and swivel chair. Next to it, stacks of papers were scattered round the floor.

‘Can I get you something, a cup of tea?’

Joanna was staring beyond Rachel towards what she imagined must have been her father’s home office. She’d have liked to go into that room, to sit amongst Vince Arnold’s things and get an idea of the kind of man he was.

‘Is that his room?’ she said.

‘His office, yes, he often worked from home. I’ve been going through his things, trying to sort them out. There’s so much stuff, papers and things, there’s no point in keeping it all. Tea?’

‘No thanks.’

Joanna pulled her gaze away from the open door.

‘What was it you wanted to see me about?’ she asked.

Rachel looked thrown by her directness. She hesitated a moment as though to compose her thoughts.

‘Well, it’s like I said...I was going through Vince’s things. You wouldn’t believe the amount of rubbish he kept...and I found this in the middle of one of his reporter’s notebooks. It fell out, and, well, see for yourself...’

Rachel handed Joanna a photograph. She took it and stared at it in disbelief.

‘Where did he get this?’ she said.

‘That’s what I’d like to know. I’ve certainly never seen it before. I thought...I don’t know...I thought that maybe you could explain...’

‘Me? Why would I know anything about it? I didn’t even know who he was until you came.’

In the picture Joanna was wearing her school uniform. She was standing by the school gates waiting for the bus, but she was looking into the distance, completely unaware that the picture was being taken. She guessed that she was about fourteen at the time. Joanna tried to think of an explanation as to why Vince Arnold might have had a picture of her in his notebook, but she could think of none.

Rachel sighed. 'Vince was acting very strange before he disappeared...I thought...I was sure that he was keeping something from me.'

'What do you mean?'

'He was distant...distracted...at first I thought that maybe he was seeing someone,' Rachel said.

'And, what, you thought it was my mother?'

Rachel shrugged. 'I don't know. It might make sense.'

'You thought that we were playing happy families after all that time. That's why you asked my mother that night if Vince had been in touch. You thought it was her who'd given him the picture, didn't you? That was why you came, to find out if I already knew about him.'

Rachel shook her head. 'I didn't know about the picture then. I only found it yesterday.'

'But you suspected something...you thought that he'd been seeing her, my mother. She hated him after what he'd done. You know that, don't you?'

'But she loved him once. Vince had a way of making people love him.'

Joanna stared at the picture.

'He must have taken it himself,' she said. 'He must have been watching me.'

Rachel nodded.

'He never said anything. He must have been curious of course, but after you were born, when your mother refused our offer, he never mentioned you again. It was like it had never happened. I wouldn't have blamed him for being curious...for wanting to know about you...'

Joanna had an image of her father sitting in his car across from the school. She imagined him watching, and waiting for her to come out. He'd taken the picture without her knowing. She felt exhilarated and unnerved at the idea.

'But if he were that curious, why didn't he make an effort to contact me?' she said.

'I don't know. Maybe he knew how much he'd hurt your mother...hurt me. I'm not going to pretend that I was sympathetic towards your mother. She almost destroyed my marriage, and at the time I wanted her to hurt like hell...but now...well, I can see how he might have taken her in, Vince is...was a very charming man. Manipulative, I guess you could say.'

Joanna detected an undercurrent of anger in Rachel's words, and she wondered if it was the bereavement had made her that way. It seemed that Rachel, too, had questions

to which she was seeking answers, and Joanna decided that she would ask her a question that had been playing on her own mind since she'd first learned about the drowning.

'Rachel, do you think my...do you think that Vince committed suicide?'

'What makes you say that?'

'What you said about his behaviour and...well, there's no way of knowing, is there, when someone drowns?'

Rachel shook her head emphatically.

'Vince would never do anything to hurt himself. Besides, he couldn't swim. He was terrified of water. No, his death was a terrible accident. Nothing more.'

Rachel pushed her hair back. The hand with which she did it trembled, belying her self-assuredness, and Joanna wondered if she believed what she'd just said.

While Rachel was talking, Joanna slipped the photo into her handbag. It was the only indication that she'd come across that suggested that Vince Arnold had been curious about her, even if he hadn't had the desire to do something about it. Rachel didn't ask her to give the picture back. She'd have no use for it. What was it but another reminder of her husband's earlier betrayal?

At the door, Joanna thanked Rachel for telling her about the photo, even though she knew that Rachel had done it more for own benefit than as any act of enlightenment for Joanna. She drove home as fast as she dared on the frosty road. At the traffic lights she took the photo from her bag, looked at it in the dimness of the streetlights that shone through the windscreen, and wondered about the man that had taken it.

When she arrived home the lights were on. She stepped into the warmth of the hall, undid her scarf and coat and hung them over the banister. Her mother was sitting by the fire reading. She looked up as she entered.

'Brrr...it's cold out there,' Joanna said.

Her mother put down her book.

'God, I was almost asleep there,' she said. 'What time is it?' She leaned forward to look at the clock. 'I think I might have been asleep.'

Joanna didn't answer her mother's speculations about whether she'd been asleep or not. She reached into her bag and pulled the photograph out.

'I've just been to see Rachel Arnold,' she said. 'She gave me this.'

Joanna held the photograph out to her mother. Her mother took it and stared at it for a moment.

‘Where did she find this?’ she said.

‘It was in a notebook belonging to Vince.’

Her mother nodded.

‘You were about fifteen there. I remember the day I bought you that jacket. The woman in the shop said blue was lovely on you.’

Joanna sat on the arm of her mother’s chair and leaned over her shoulder to view the picture.

‘I can’t believe he was watching me,’ she said.

Her mother looked up and twisted her head round. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The day that he took this picture, he must have been outside the school waiting for me to come out. I wish I’d seen him.’

Joanna’s mother said nothing. Joanna reached out and took the picture from her. She stared at it, trying to imagine the hand that had held the camera, the eye that had looked through the lens.

‘If I’d seen him taking my picture, I would have asked him what he was doing. Maybe then I would have known,’ she said.

Her mother stood up abruptly. She took a few paces towards the fireplace and turned.

‘He didn’t take it. I did.’ Her voice was barely audible.

Joanna stared at her. ‘You, but how...I don’t understand.’

‘I went to meet you from school that day. It was a Wednesday, you were finished early and I thought it would be nice to go somewhere. We took the bus into the city and got off at the zoo. Do you remember?’

Joanna did. She remembered seeing her mother coming towards her as she’d stood at the bus stop waiting for the bus home. They’d gone to the zoo, eaten ice cream and they’d taken pictures of each other next to the animal enclosures. She’d taken off the blue college jacket and tied it by its white sleeves around her waist. She remembered it flapping against her grey school skirt as she walked. It had been an unseasonably warm April day.

‘When I saw you standing at the bust stop, I took the camera from my bag and took a picture. You hadn’t seen me. I wanted to take a picture of you as you were, not smiling at the camera, but natural, the way you looked when no one else was around.’

Joanna shook her head in confusion.

‘But if you took the picture, how did Vince Arnold get it?’

Joanna's mother looked at her hands.

'I gave it to him.'

'But you said you'd never seen him. What did you do, send it to him by post?'

Her mother shook her head.

'What I said wasn't quite true. Vince came here just weeks before Rachel arrived that night. I hadn't seen him before that, I promise you.'

'What, he was here and you didn't say? What did he want? Does Rachel know?'

'I didn't tell anyone. You were at college. There was a knock at the door, I thought that you'd come back for something and had forgotten your keys. When I opened the door he was standing there. He asked me if he could come in. I was too surprised to do anything else, so I let him.'

'What did he want?'

'I'm not sure. He asked me how I was, how we'd been. He said he was sorry that things had ended the way that they had. It hadn't been his intention, he said. I thought I'd feel angrier, bitterer, but I guess the years did something to dampen those feelings down. So many times I thought about what I'd say if I ever met him again, but none of them came to mind.'

Joanna looked directly at her mother.

'Did he ask about me?' she said.

Her mother nodded. 'He wanted to know what you were like, how you were doing. I told him that you were studying photography at college. I said that you'd done fine without him in your life, that we both had.'

'Did he ask to see me?'

Her mother shook her head.

'He knew that I didn't want that. I showed him photos. He said you had my eyes. He asked me if he could keep a picture and he chose that one, the one of you standing at the bus stop. I heard nothing after that, not until Rachel showed up that night. I thought she'd found out that he'd been here, that she'd come around to give me a piece of her mind.'

'You must have been shocked.'

'I can't begin to describe how I felt, the fact that I'd seen him after all those years. I'd spent so long hating him for what he did. I hadn't forgiven him, that wasn't going to change after one conversation, but I felt that he had changed. He wasn't as self-

assured as he used to be. He was more serious. I guess age had changed him, though he'd worn it well.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I thought about it, but how to begin after all those years? I was afraid of how you might react. And besides, he hadn't actually said that he wanted to meet you.'

Joanna took a deep breath.

'Don't you think it strange that he came here just before he disappeared? I mean why did he choose to do it then?'

Her mother shook her head.

'I don't know. I've been asking myself the same thing...wondering if he were putting his affairs in order. It was like he knew that something was going to happen...'

'I asked Rachel if she thought he'd...if he might have done it himself, but she said no. She was adamant about it.'

'I would have been, too, if he were the same Vince that I'd known, but people do strange things.'

'You think he did then?'

'I don't know. I'd hate to think it, despite everything...but he didn't say why he'd come. He didn't offer any explanation.'

'Why didn't you tell Rachel that he'd been here?'

'She wouldn't have understood. I couldn't explain it. I was finding it difficult to explain it to myself. You think I should, don't you?'

'She needs to know the truth,' Joanna said.

'We don't always get what we need.' Her mother's tone was defiant.

'What good will lies do?'

'It won't, any more than it will to tell the truth. Vince is dead. Nothing I say is going to change that. Rachel thinks it was an accident and it probably was. What did she say about the photo?'

'She was surprised, wanted to know if I knew anything about it.'

'What did you tell her?'

'What could I tell her? We both surmised he'd taken it himself.'

Her mother nodded.

'Maybe it's better if you don't see Rachel Arnold anymore,' she said.

Joanna took the picture from her mother and put it back in her bag.

‘I won’t say anything about the picture,’ she said. ‘Or about him coming here. I don’t know why you dislike her so much though. She seems all right.’

‘You wouldn’t understand, Joanna. Now, please, can we just drop the matter? It hasn’t been easy, the last few weeks. I don’t know why Vince chose to come, and I wish with all my heart that he hadn’t. But, I’ve got to move on now. And I can’t do that if you keep coming home with stories from Rachel Arnold. If you see her, that’s your business, but don’t make it mine. I was finished with the Arnolds a long time ago.’

Joanna didn’t answer her. She took her bag and left the room. When she got upstairs, she took her phone from her bag and noticed that she had a missed call from Oliver Molloy. She tried calling him back, but the number was busy. She wondered if he would mind her calling round. She knew that she ought to wait for him to invite her, but he was the only person that she felt understood her and she needed someone to talk to. She refreshed her make-up and went back downstairs. Her mother had gone back to reading her book.

‘I’m going over to Oliver’s,’ she said. ‘I don’t know if I’ll be home.’

Her mother nodded.

‘Okay love,’ she said. She smiled, and Joanna knew it was an effort. This wasn’t easy for her mother, but it wasn’t easy for her either. Her mother had to understand that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Oliver had just put the phone down when the doorbell rang. Carmen was standing outside struggling with her umbrella. When she'd managed to put it down, she walked past him into the hall. Rain dripped from the umbrella, and left dark spots on the carpet surrounding Carmen's feet, but she didn't seem to notice.

'It's ridiculous. Nobody has heard anything from her. I called all the numbers you gave me and nobody knew anything. Most of them said they hadn't spoken to Mercedes in months. One woman said it was about three years since she'd heard from her.'

She looked around for somewhere to put her umbrella. Oliver took it from her, opened the door and stood it in the porch.

'I thought I told you not come to the house. What if she arrived and found you here? You should have called.'

'I've been calling you all day. You didn't answer.'

'I was at the court all afternoon. In fact I'm not long in. Why didn't you leave a message? I would have called.'

'When? Next week?'

Her tone was sharp, impatient. She walked into the living room ahead of him. She didn't sit down, but crossed the room and stood in front of the fire. She turned towards him.

'I think we should talk to the police. Mercedes has been gone too long now. Anything could have happened to her.'

Oliver shook his head emphatically and took a few steps towards her.

'No, we can't do that. How could I explain what happened? They'd want to know about the last time I'd seen her. They'd ask questions.'

'We have to. We can't just leave it like this. It doesn't matter what happened. There's no other way. Mercedes hasn't contacted anyone. I called my mother today. She wanted to know if I'd spoken to Mercedes yet. I had to tell her that we didn't know where she was. She's going crazy.'

Oliver paced the room.

'Look, Carmen, don't do anything hasty. Just give it a little more time, okay? Don't you see this is what Mercedes wants? She's punishing us, but she'll be in touch. We just need to be patient. I don't want the Garda coming round here asking difficult questions. If I thought it would do any good, don't you think I would have

called them myself? I'm as worried about Mercedes as you are, but she'll turn up. I'm sure of it.'

Carmen bit her nail.

'I don't know. She's never done anything like this before.'

'Well maybe she never had reason to. Remember, we're responsible for this. Do you want to explain to some Garda that we slept together, because I sure as hell don't? They probably wouldn't take it seriously anyway. Hundreds of people go missing every day. A lot of them don't want to be found.'

'Is that what you think, that Mercedes doesn't want us to find her? What about my mother? She'd call my mother. She wouldn't allow her to worry like that.'

'Maybe she has called her. Maybe she told your mother not to say anything.'

'No. My mother was crazy on the phone. She hasn't heard anything.'

Carmen sat down again and looked into the fire.

'I wish I'd never told her. It was stupid.'

'Your mother?'

Carmen shook her head. 'Mercedes.'

Oliver nodded. 'You know I won't disagree with that.'

Carmen shivered and moved closer to the fire.

'Look at me. I'm completely wet. I hate this country. I don't know how Mercedes could choose to live here.'

Oliver shrugged.

'You get used to it.'

Carmen took off her leather jacket. It was short and her skirt was darkened with rain. She looked down at it, slipped out of her shoes and wriggled her feet.

'Maybe I could change into something of Mercedes's,' she said.

Oliver hesitated and took her jacket from her.

'She took most of her clothes, but there are a few things in the wardrobe.'

Carmen nodded. 'I'll go up and take a look.'

She was putting her shoes back on, but Oliver didn't want her to go upstairs. What if she should see something that she shouldn't? He couldn't think of anything offhand, but it was a risk that he was not prepared to take.

'It's okay. You stay here. I'll get you something.'

He went into the hall, hung Carmen's jacket on the coat stand and hurried up the stairs. He thought of all the clothes he'd taken to the charity shop. He was glad that

he had left some of them. Carmen would see it as a reason for Mercedes to return. He opened the wardrobe. The short silk skirt hung just inside the door. The fabric slid between his fingers, cool against his skin. He took it out, then decided against it, and instead took a pair of jeans from a hanger. He closed the wardrobe and went downstairs.

Carmen was sitting at the fire. She had peeled off her stockings and her bare legs were outstretched. If he narrowed his eyes a little, she could have been Mercedes sitting there. She looked up as he entered.

‘I hope these are okay,’ he said.

She stood up and he handed her the jeans. She started to unzip her skirt and he turned away before he heard the fabric fall to the floor.

‘So chivalrous,’ Carmen said.

He ignored her sarcasm, waited until he had heard her zip up the jeans before he turned back to her.

‘Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Hot chocolate?’

Carmen smiled.

‘Chocolate would be nice.’

They sat opposite each other cradling mugs of hot chocolate. Oliver was wondering how long he could prevent Carmen from doing something rash when she answered the question for him.

‘We’ll give it another week and then if we haven’t heard anything, we will have to go to the police.’

Oliver nodded.

‘Okay. In the meantime, let’s just stay positive. Mercedes is well able to look after herself.’

Carmen seemed calmer now. She looked into the fire and sipped her chocolate.

‘Why did you tell her?’ he asked.

Carmen shrugged.

‘I don’t know. It was stupid.’

‘You must know.’

She looked at him. Her eyes glittered black in the firelight.

‘I’ve always wanted what Mercedes had. When we were children, Mercedes always seemed to get everything she wanted. They didn’t notice me. It was always Mercedes. She was the best at everything.’

‘Who didn’t notice?’

Carmen shrugged. ‘Anyone that mattered. At school she always got the highest grades. She was the most talented, the most beautiful.’

Carmen stopped talking.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he said.

He watched her reaction, saw that he had disarmed her.

‘But you want Mercedes,’ she said.

He ignored her comment.

‘You’re different, and you should be different. I don’t know what it’s like to experience rivalry like that. There was just me. I didn’t have any brothers or sisters.’

Carmen put her mug on the fireplace. She leaned forward in her seat.

‘How old were you when your mother left?’

‘I was seven, almost eight.’

‘And you never heard from her again?’

Oliver shook his head.

‘No. I spent years wondering what had happened her. Then I just stopped. She’d walked out, so why would I want to find her?’

He stood up. He knew that Carmen had heard his history from Mercedes, but it was not a story that he felt like retelling. He didn’t want or need Carmen’s sympathy.

‘Look, I’ll put your things in a bag and give you a lift back to the hotel. I don’t want to risk having you here,’ he said.

‘Okay.’ Carmen put her shoes on and stood up.

‘Oliver. We don’t have to be enemies,’ she said.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he went into his office and got a bag to put her things in. He had succeeded in softening her. Now he would have to think of a way to prevent her from doing anything stupid.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Joanna pulled up outside Oliver's house and cut the engine. She was relieved to see his jeep parked in the driveway. Lights shone in both the hallway and behind the closed curtains in the front room, and she imagined him and the kind of welcome she might get before she'd even undone her seatbelt. In Oliver, she'd found a kind of sanctuary. She felt that no matter what she told him, he wouldn't judge her. And it was with this feeling of jubilant anticipation that she stepped from the car and arrived at his front door.

Joanna raised her hand and was about to ring the doorbell when the sound of voices inside made her quickly withdraw. She crouched closer to the door to listen, careful as she did so to keep out of view of the hall window through which she might be spotted. The first voice she heard was Oliver's, but she couldn't make out what he said. The voice that answered was a woman's, the inflection unmistakably Spanish. 'We can't just leave it like this. It doesn't matter what happened...' There was a bump and a door closed muting the voices within before the woman had reached the end of her sentence, but Joanna had heard enough to know that Mercedes had returned.

Stepping back from the front door, Joanna glanced at the window. The curtains were drawn, but a light shone through a slight gap where they hadn't been closed tight, and she ducked as she passed the hall window and stepped into the sodden grass beneath the sitting-room window. Slowly, she uncurled her body, so that her eyes were just above the level of the windowsill. She was hidden from the view of passers-by by a hedge that ran the length of the garden wall, but from Oliver's neighbours' garden, she would be clearly visible. She prayed that no one would see her peeking through the window into his front room.

The chink in the curtain offered her a restricted view. She saw the woman that she had seen that day in Grafton Street pass the window and move towards the fireplace, but she couldn't see Oliver. She strained to hear words between them, but the woman appeared to be alone in the room. She stretched her hands towards the fire. Oliver must have re-entered the room then, because the woman said something, then reached round to the back of her skirt, unzipped it and let it fall on the floor at her feet. The woman smiled, but Joanna didn't see what happened next. Instead her attention was wrenched from the scene unfolding beyond the glass to the something that had brushed up against her legs in the dark. Startled, Joanna jumped backwards, knocking

over a potted plant as she did so. She dove for cover behind Oliver's car as the disgruntled black cat meowed its disapproval after her retreating form.

Joanna could hear her heart thump as she waited for the front door to open, but minutes passed and nothing happened. The cat hopped onto the neighbours' wall, and bored now by its findings in Oliver's garden, it vanished down the other side. Joanna rose slowly, and made her way along Oliver's car towards the garden gate. She kept one eye on the window to ensure that nobody had looked out through the curtains, but they remained as before, the chink revealing nothing, only to those who put their faces to the glass, something, which she now had no desire to do.

Having reached her car without being apprehended, Joanna fumbled the keys into the ignition and drove away from the curb. Only when she was out of view of his house, did she turn the headlights on and realise that she hadn't taken time to secure her seatbelt. She did so and without any destination in mind, she drove. It didn't take much to make sense of what she had seen through Oliver's window. She wondered when Mercedes had returned, and when he had planned on telling her. Anger caused a pulsing sensation behind her temples, but it was anger at her own naivety, not at him. Her mother was right; it had been too soon to get involved with him. Sure, he'd said it was over, he might have even thought it was, but it was her willingness to become involved with him that annoyed her most. She thought she'd learnt something from her experience with Michael, but sadly she'd proven that theory wrong.

She stopped the car along the quays. It had stopped raining and she got out, glad of the cool wind on her face soothing her hot skin like a balm. She pulled her coat tight round her and walked in the direction of O'Connell Bridge. It wasn't late, but already several homeless people had settled on the boardwalk for the night, heads covered, backs turned against the wind, two men slept head to head, their bodies hidden beneath filthy blankets, nothing visible but a pair of black runners on one man's feet and two inches of skinny leg where his tracksuit bottoms were torn. She wondered where these men had found shelter during the freeze, from reading the newspapers she knew that not all of the homeless had made it. It was a disheartening thought, and she shivered and moved on.

The sight of Mercedes undoing her skirt, and then standing in her stockings by the fire had made her stomach turn. She was glad that she hadn't seen what happened next. She didn't need to. Though she tried to feel angry with Oliver, she couldn't.

Mercedes was his wife. She knew that it was a possibility, despite what he said. She'd known that night when Mercedes had come knocking at the door. She was sure that he hadn't set out to fool her – not the way Michael had.

She walked on, hands buried in her pockets against the cutting wind. She hadn't allowed herself to think of Michael in a long time. She'd heard that he'd got married just a year after they'd split up, and her only feeling was one of pity for the woman that had got involved with him. He wouldn't be faithful to any woman. He just didn't have the capacity for it. She remembered how he'd denied it, talked himself round in rings until he realised that there was no absolution for what he'd done. She'd read his emails, it wasn't something she was proud of, but when he'd started sitting up half the night on his computer, she'd begun to suspect that something was wrong. And then she'd seen them, the emails that had been sent back and forth between them – a woman that he'd met in an Internet chat room – a woman that he had arranged to book into a hotel with in Brussels, a trip that he'd told her was work-related. It was pathetic, but she was glad that she'd found out before it made her life pathetic, too. She'd told him never to contact her again. He'd sent her a text message six months later, which she'd promptly deleted, and didn't give him a thought again. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She wondered sometimes what he was doing with the voyeuristic curiosity that people reserve for past loves, but it was just that. She had no desire ever to see him again.

She had almost reached the bridge. She could see the green light that illuminated the façade of the Heineken building up ahead, heard the rattle of a train coming out of Tara Street station. She didn't want to go home. It was too early, her mother would wonder why she'd returned so soon and she didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to admit that her mother had been right, although given the circumstances, her mother was the last person who could condemn her behaviour. She couldn't even begin to try.

Joanna thought about Vince Arnold's recent visit to her mother. She wondered if, despite what her mother said, he had hoped to meet her. Three weeks had elapsed between his visit and the night that Rachel Arnold had come. And Rachel said that he'd been missing, for what three weeks? It seemed too strange to be a coincidence. If what Rachel said were true, it would mean that her mother was one of the last, or perhaps was *the* last person to see Vince Arnold alive. She wondered if her mother were aware of that. Was that the reason she didn't want to tell Rachel that Vince had

been to see her? Was she afraid that Rachel would suspect that she knew something about his death that she, perhaps, had had something to do with it? Joanna walked faster. What was the possibility of her mother having been the last person to see Vince Arnold alive, the woman whose heart he'd broken more than twenty years before? Her mother had been so upset when Rachel had broken the news. So upset that she'd taken off without telling anyone where she was going. What would Rachel Arnold think if she discovered that her mother had seen Vince just days, hours even before he died? Maybe her mother was right when she said he might have been putting his affairs in order. Otherwise, it was all too much of a coincidence, wasn't it? Joanna turned at the bridge and hurried back the way she'd come.

She'd hoped to talk to Oliver about it, but now she was glad she hadn't. The only person she needed to talk to was her mother. What matter if she returned from Oliver's house early? In the greater picture, what had happened at Oliver's was of little consequence. She was hurt, yes, but it was nothing compared to the conflicting emotions she'd experienced since she discovered the identity of her father. With renewed resolve to know the truth, Joanna started her car and turned towards home. This time her mother wouldn't lie to her. This time she would demand the truth, whatever the consequences.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As soon as Oliver had dropped Carmen off at the hotel, he began to plan his next move. To prevent his wilful sister-in-law from going to the police, he would have to make it look as though Mercedes had been in touch. It wasn't enough to say that she had called, Carmen would need physical evidence, something to throw her off the trail for a while, at least until he had thought of a more absolute way to put an end to the problem.

When he entered the living room, he could still get Carmen's scent. Coco Chanel mixed with the acrid reek of cigarette smoke. He crossed the room and opened the window, but when he felt the icy air begin to penetrate the room he drew it shut again. Besides, he hated to admit it, but he liked that dark, woody scent that spoke of things forbidden.

Oliver took off his coat and threw it on the armchair. He'd had an idea while he was driving home, it wouldn't work indefinitely, but he figured if he were to forge a letter from Mercedes, it might convince Carmen that her sister had come to no harm and stop her from going to the police.

He went upstairs, turning on the lights as he went. When he opened the bedroom door, he immediately felt for the switch. It was stupid he knew, but ever since that night the darkness had unnerved him. He had taken to leaving the bathroom light on all night and his door ajar, so that he didn't wake in complete darkness. The absence of light heightened the senses and played tricks on the mind. And it didn't take much for his over-active mind to conjure images in the night.

Oliver sat on the edge of the bed and took off his shoes. He leaned over and flicked the radio on. He had it tuned as always to Lyric FM and springtime from Vivaldi's Four Seasons filled the room. He rolled sideways off the bed and crossed to his desk. He opened the bottom drawer and took out Mercedes's letters. This time, his intention was not to read them, but to study his wife's handwriting.

He sat in his swivel chair and rolled the elastic band from the bundle of envelopes scattering them on the desk. He took out the first and under the white glow of the halogen desk lamp; he began to examine the handwriting. Mercedes's writing was quite distinctive, each letter curved into the next and each word ended with a flourish. He spread several letters side by side on the desktop to check the peculiarities of the letters, and then, satisfied that he recognised the loop of the L's and the F's that

looked like uneven bows, he set about transcribing one of the letters onto a blank sheet.

He wrote and re-wrote the words, screwing pages into balls and tossing them into the wastepaper basket until he was satisfied that he had successfully imitated Mercedes's hand. He then began to pick out individual letters to create new words and he began writing a letter to himself. He set about writing the letter with the same concentration with which he analysed legal documents at work. Any slight error deemed the manuscript a failure, and he would take some fresh writing paper and begin again.

He took his time, eyes closed against the garish light of the lamp; he tried to imagine what Mercedes would write. At first the sentences that he wrote seemed false, too carefully constructed. He needed to write as she spoke, and with an immense effort he sat back and allowed his wife to enter his head. Shaken, and several attempts later, he finished his letter. He read it, and reread it several times until finally he was not convinced that Mercedes hadn't written it – that she hadn't used him momentarily as a medium to convey her rage onto the page. He shuddered and read over the words once more.

January 2010

Oliver,

You'll have known by the writing that this letter's from me. Perhaps, you've opened it expecting forgiveness. Well, let me tell before you read on that that's the last thing on my mind.

I'm writing because my anger wouldn't allow me to put into words how I feel if I were to see you face-to-face. You know that. My emotions always get the better of me in any argument, but this is beyond anything that's ever happened between us before, and I couldn't trust myself to say anything coherent about what you've done.

When Carmen told me, I didn't believe her. I thought it was a wind-up, I was just waiting for her to laugh, to say something about the look on my face, but she didn't, and I knew it was true. She said you came onto her. But I don't care about that. I know enough about my little sister to know what she's capable of, but I thought I knew you. So much for you disliking her. I suppose you always wanted to fuck her.

You just never got the chance. Or maybe you did, how would I know? Maybe you've been at it behind my back for years. Nothing would surprise me now.

I'm not writing to absolve you. I just hope that you have enough decency to feel some remorse, but I think the only sadness you'll feel is for yourself, since that's the only person you really care about. I'm not worried about Carmen. I suppose you'll blame her, anything rather than accept the blame yourself, and yes, I do, too. But like I said, I'd have expected more from you. You've both betrayed me and in my eyes that makes you as bad as each other. Carmen's just somewhat more predictable. Or should I say pathetic. She's always had this notion of competition between us. Don't think she cares about you, she only told me because she wanted to win, to finally say that she'd taken something that was mine, but if something's that easy to take, then she can have it, she can have you, but I suppose the thrill's gone now that it's out in the open, hasn't it? Carmen never thinks about the consequences.

She's called me a number of times begging me to call her back. You can tell her she can stop wasting her time, she won't be hearing from me, not after this, I don't have a sister anymore, or a husband for that matter. What you did was despicable and I'll never as long as I live forgive you.

Don't try to find me. It's over now. Maybe it has been for some time, and it's taken this for me to realise it.

Mercedes

Oliver folded the letter, put it in an envelope and addressed it to himself in his wife's cursive hand. He decided that he should go out of town and post it from some remote place. Carmen would probably insist on going to whatever town featured on the postmark. He supposed he could just tell her that he'd thrown the envelope away without thinking, but she probably knew that he was far too scrupulous to do that.

He sat back and propped the letter against his computer. He considered writing a similar letter to Carmen, but then decided against it. He didn't want to give her anything that she could bring to the police. No, it was better to let her think that Mercedes had written to him only.

The ten o' clock news was on the radio. Oliver stood up from his desk and changed into his pyjamas. He was in the en-suite bathroom brushing his teeth when he heard something that made him stop dead. He hurried back into the bedroom and turned up

the volume. The remains of a body had been found in the Dublin Mountains, the reporter said. Two hill-walkers had come across the remains in a shallow grave. It was not yet known whether the remains were that of a man or woman, but a skull, femur bone, and a full set of teeth had been found at the site, and were now being examined. Speculation suggested that the remains might be that of a young Dublin woman who had been abducted from her home almost a year before. Oliver spit the toothpaste out in the sink and rinsed his mouth. He had broken out in a sweat, and a trembling had begun in his hands. The report had talked about remains, skeletal remains. It was not Mercedes. This time it was not Mercedes. He wondered if her body had yet begun to decompose. How long would the sacking in which he'd buried her protect her from the creatures that crawled beneath the earth? He shuddered. , There were others buried in those hills - women who had vanished without trace. There was no reason why they would ever find her. The discovery of that other body, the one reported on the news, had been against the odds, but his reasoning failed to put his mind at ease. He sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands and thought about the place where he had buried her in a lonely patch amongst a copse of trees. Had he dug deep enough? Or would the day come when a passer-by would come across her, his beautiful young wife, nothing to identify her by, but teeth and bones.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Joanna heard the voices as soon as she stepped into the hall. The door into the living room was closed and she paused in the hallway to listen. The two women were talking, unaware of her presence and she crept towards the closed door to listen.

‘So, he definitely didn’t say anything?’ Rachel’s tone was urgent, and her mother’s when she answered was full of thinly-veiled exasperation.

‘I told you we didn’t talk about you. We talked of other things, Joanna mostly.’

‘Tell me the truth, Angela. Was that the first time you’d seen him in all those years?’

‘What? Do you think we’d been carrying on behind your back? That I’d have called you here to tell you that?’

‘It doesn’t add up, him coming here out of the blue like that, I mean why would he?’

‘I told you, I don’t know why. Why do you think I was reluctant to tell you in the first place? The only reason I’m telling you now is because Joanna wanted me to.’

Unconsciously, at the mention of her name, Joanna drew back from the door. But she knew that her mother’s standoff with Rachel Arnold was not over yet. Rachel clearly wanted answers and Joanna wondered if it were really beyond her mother’s power to provide them.

‘How did he seem to you? I mean, obviously, it must have been awkward, but did he appear anxious about anything?’

‘On the contrary, I’d say he was calm.’

‘And when he was leaving, did he suggest seeing you again? Did he ask to see Joanna?’

‘Really Rachel, there’s nothing I can tell you that will be of any use to you.’

Joanna imagined her mother spreading her hands at the futility of the conversation. She must have been regretting ever having decided to tell Rachel. But she had told her, wasn’t that enough in itself to prove that her mother had nothing to conceal?

‘You haven’t answered the question,’ Rachel said.

Joanna heard her mother sigh.

‘No. No, he didn’t suggest anything like that. If you must know, he apologised for what happened. He wanted to know about Joanna, what she was like. That’s why I gave him the picture, but in so far as meeting her, he didn’t say any such thing. Tell me, Rachel, why do you think I can give you the answers you’re looking for? I

mean...if anything, surely you're the person who best knew Vince's state of mind? Did something happen between you before he went missing? Is that it?

'No. Nothing happened. I'm just trying to figure out why he might have come here. Why you may have been the last person to see him, I mean, it's ironic, isn't it?'

'I can't help you there, Rachel. Whatever his reason, you can be sure it was for his benefit, not ours. We both know that Vince never did anything that didn't benefit himself. And inevitably someone was caught in the fallout, you, me, but not Vince, not ever. No, Vince walked away from everything like the bloody Teflon man. So, really, I don't know why he came unless it was to eradicate some shred of guilt that had begun to fester in his latter years. And I don't know if someone's capable of changing that much.'

There was a pause after her mother's outburst. Joanna wondered what was happening at the other side of the door. Finally, Rachel spoke.

'I suppose I should thank you for telling me. You didn't have to.'

'Joanna wanted me to.'

'Yes, well...'

Joanna crept back down the hallway as the conversation between the two women began to wane. She eased open the front door, closed it loudly enough to be heard in the living room and threw her keys on the table in the hall. She entered the living room still wearing her coat and scarf.

'Rachel, hello.'

Her mother and Rachel Arnold were standing now, facing each other like rivals at a duel. Rachel Arnold greeted her with a smile.

'Your mother's just been telling me about Vince's visit. Quite a surprise.'

'We thought you should know,' Joanna said.

She glanced at her mother who refused to meet her eye.

Rachel nodded. 'I appreciate it.'

Joanna noticed the two teacups on the coffee table. Rachel Arnold's was still steaming and possibly untouched. Unlike her rival, Joanna's mother was not in the habit of offering Brandy to her guests, and she figured that if she had been, a good many mouthfuls may have passed Rachel's lips by then.

'I'd better be going,' Rachel said, after a moment's awkward silence.

'If you think of anything else, you might call me...or if there's something, anything that you'd like to know.'

Rachel's eyes flicked from Joanna to her mother. And Joanna's mother nodded, and moved in an attempt to hasten Rachel's movements towards the door.

Joanna followed the two women into the hallway.

At the door, Joanna's mother stood back and Rachel thanked her again for calling. Her mother said nothing, but after a brief pause, as Rachel stepped out into the cold night air, she spoke again.

'I am sorry about Vince, you know.'

The words hung for a moment between them, before Rachel nodded and hurried down the garden path.

Joanna's mother closed the front door and turned to face Joanna.

'Satisfied?' she said.

'It was the right thing to do. Even if you didn't want to, if it was awkward.'

In the living room, her mother picked up Rachel's cup and poured the tea into the sink. Joanna lingered behind her and watched.

'It is ironic though, isn't it?'

'What?'

'You - being the last one to see him.'

'I suppose it is. I hadn't thought about it.'

Her mother's eyes questioned her, and she felt guilty for having to ask, but she asked anyway.

'Is there anything you're not telling Rachel Arnold, that you haven't told me?'

'I can't believe you're saying this, Joanna. What do think, that I had something to do with what happened to him? Are you suggesting, my God, Joanna, don't you know me at all?'

Joanna shifted uncomfortably.

'I'm sorry. I had to ask. I know it sounds bad, but if you were the last one... it just looks, I don't know, maybe he could've driven you to it, people often do things that you'd never think they were capable of... I know you wouldn't, it was stupid of me, but I had to make sure...'

Joanna's mother sat heavily into a chair.

'Vince has done a good many things to hurt me, but I'd never be capable of something like that. Twenty-three years ago, he gave me plenty of reason to want to harm him... but, no, I told Rachel all I had to tell her. There's nothing else... but you know what? I don't think she's told me everything. Why else would she come round

here trying to get information from me? Okay, I invited her, but I figure something happened before Vince went missing, and she wanted to find out if he'd told me what it was. He didn't, and now that she knows that, I'll be surprised if we hear from her again.'

'Do you think she reckons that Vince's death wasn't an accident?'

'No, it's not that. I think if that were it, she'd be talking to the Guards. But there is something she's not saying. It might be nothing, maybe they'd simply argued. Look, I know that this whole situation has been a shock for you. And you're right, there have been too many lies, but no more, I promise you that. I'm not hiding anything from you, Joanna. And if you've thought badly of me, the only one I can blame for that is myself. I hope we can leave the matter at that. Vince is dead, and I'm sorry you had to find things out the way you did. If there's something else, anything you want to know, just ask me. Don't go drawing your own conclusions, okay?'

'Okay.'

Joanna's mother sat down, took the remote control and turned on the television. Joanna sat down on the sofa. She wondered if her mother was right about Rachel Arnold having a secret. But she decided that Rachel was probably just trying to determine whether her husband might have taken his own life. She tried to switch off her thoughts as the nine o' clock news came on. When the reporter announced that human remains had been found in the Dublin Mountains, she became genuinely interested.

'I wonder if that's one of those poor women who went missing in the nineties,' her mother said. 'At least one family could finally be at peace.'

The reporter said that Gardai had been searching the remote area near Johnny Foxes pub since they received a tip-off from a member of the public related to the disappearance of a young woman who they believed had been abducted from her home by a criminal gang three years before. The remains, the reporter said, had been taken to St. James's Hospital for forensic investigation.

'I thought you weren't coming home tonight,' her mother said, as the reporter moved on to a less interesting story.

Joanna settled back into the sofa.

'I was tired,' she said. 'I didn't want to stay out late.'

Her mother turned back to the television and didn't ask any more questions.

Joanna thought of Oliver. He was probably in bed with his wife at that moment. The idea saddened her. She wondered if he'd call to explain. She didn't know what she'd say in response if he did. Whether she would react angrily to his apology, or tell him flippantly that it was fine, that she was happy he'd managed to put things right with his wife.

When her mobile rang, she was surprised to see Oliver's name flash on the screen. Her mother looked at her questioningly as she pressed the silence button and continued to watch his name flash before her. When finally the phone stopped ringing, she called her voicemail and listened to Oliver's voice telling her that he was sorry to have missed her call, and to give him a call back when she got the chance. She wondered how he'd managed to call with Mercedes in the house. Had he gone outside, maybe on the pretence of getting something from the car? She turned off her phone, ignored her mother's questioning glance and resolved to forget about Oliver Molloy, at least for the rest of the night.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Oliver had checked his phone several times during the day, but Joanna had not returned his call. He sat down at his desk and looked out at the traffic crawling along the quays. He would invite her over for dinner; he didn't feel much like spending another evening alone. He dialled her number and this time she answered on the second ring.

'Joanna, How are you doing?'

'Oh, hi Oliver.'

'I called yesterday, I don't know if you got my message?'

There was a pause before she breathed yes down the line. It was matter-of-fact and she didn't add anything to it. Something had changed in her tone. He didn't know what it was, but curious, he continued.

'I'm sorry I hadn't a chance to call before; things have been a bit crazy. But I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner tonight?'

'Dinner?'

'Yes.'

Another pause.

'Where?'

'I don't know. I thought maybe you'd like to go out. There's a nice little Italian place by the canal, Nonna Valentina, do you know it?'

'I...yes...yes, I think so.'

'Meet you there at seven?'

'All right.'

Oliver hung up and looked at his watch. It was after five. He wondered what had got into Joanna. She'd barely said a word on the phone, and didn't exactly seem eager to meet him for dinner. Perhaps she'd changed her mind, he thought, decided that he was too old. He looked at his reflection in the darkened window. There was still time to go home, shower and get changed. He picked up his keys, locked the office and made his way out to join the steady stream of people making their way home. Whatever it was that was bothering Joanna, he would make her forget it.

Dressed in jeans, a white shirt and navy linen blazer, Oliver entered the restaurant. He'd considered wearing his Armani suit, but decided that if it were the age thing that was bothering her, it was best to dress a bit more casual. He'd splashed on a good amount of the Prada cologne that Mercedes had bought him for Christmas, and the

way that the waitress was smiling at him, he figured that he must have made some impression.

‘Table for two, please?’

He followed the Italian girl to a table by the window.

‘You would like something to drink or you want to wait?’ she asked.

‘I’ll wait, thank you.’

The girl inclined her head briefly and smiled, a dimple showing at the left corner of her dark red mouth. He watched her retreat, hips swaying hypnotically in her tight black skirt, and he couldn’t help but think of Carmen Hernandez. She had the same sultry looks, her dark hair curling to her shoulders.

Only two other tables in the restaurant were occupied, at one sat two middle-aged women deep in conversation whilst at the other an elderly couple ate in silence, looking as if they’d run out of conversation some years before. Oliver looked out the window. A man jogged past, breath streaming in the icy air as he made his way along the bank. Beyond the jogger lay the canal, shining ebony in the night, deathly alluring. A few minutes later, he saw Joanna’s red Peugeot 206 pull into a parking space by the bank. She got out, wrapped her scarf tightly round her and hurried across the road, unaware of being watched. When she entered the restaurant a moment later Oliver noted the serious expression on her face. She glanced round and seeing him she made her way across to the table. He stood up, leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, but she didn’t smile.

‘It’s good to see you. You look great,’ Oliver said.

She seemed surprised by the compliment, but said nothing. Instead she busied herself taking off her coat and scarf and draping them across the back of her chair.

‘How’ve have you been?’

‘Oh, you know.’ She smiled and shrugged.

Just then the waitress appeared with menus and re-iterated her offer of drinks.

‘I’ll have a glass of house red, please. Joanna?’

‘Water’s fine for me, thanks.’

Joanna picked up the menu and began to scan it. He had the feeling that she didn’t want to meet his eyes, and he wondered again if she had changed her mind about seeing him. He decided to come straight to the point.

‘You seem preoccupied. Is everything all right?’

‘Do I? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...I was surprised when you called.’

She put down the menu and looked directly at him for the first time.

‘I would have called sooner, but I got caught up with a case,’ he said. ‘Are you angry with me for not calling, is that it?’

Joanna shifted uncomfortably in her chair and seemed to focus on a point somewhere beyond his shoulder.

‘I thought that maybe Mercedes had come back,’ she said.

‘Mercedes...why? Why would you think that?’

Joanna shrugged, and he wondered if she had seen Carmen at the house. It would explain why she was acting so cold, why she’d seemed reluctant to meet him. He sat back in his chair and looked directly at her.

‘Mercedes did come by. She came over to pick up some of her things, but that’s not why I didn’t call you. I was busy with a case.’

‘So you had a chance to talk.’

‘We talked yes, but that’s all. Nothing’s changed. We’re not getting back together. In fact Mercedes made it quite clear that that wasn’t what she wanted.’

‘Did she?’

Oliver leaned forward in his chair. Her attitude was beginning to irk him. He wondered exactly what she had seen. He’d have preferred if she’d just come out and said what was bothering her.

‘You saw Mercedes at the house, didn’t you? That’s why you’re being like this, but I assure you I was going to tell you. I invited you here for dinner, Joanna because I wanted to see you. I’m not in the habit of spending time with people that mean nothing to me.’

‘I called by on Wednesday night. I was about to knock, but I heard voices. I want you to know that it’s not something I make a habit of, but I looked in the window and I saw her, yes, undressing by the fire.’

Joanna looked straight at him now, her eyes challenging him. He was saved from giving an immediate answer by the appearance of the waitress with their drinks. They ordered food, and as soon as the waitress was gone, he leaned forward, his anger dissipating as he reconstructed in his mind what Joanna must have seen through the window.

‘Okay, now I understand why you’re upset, but let me explain. You remember what it was like on Wednesday evening?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you were out in it, so I assume you remember it was raining?’

‘Sure.’

‘Mercedes walked from the bus. She was soaking when she arrived and I went upstairs to get her something to wear. She took off her wet clothes in front of the fire. But obviously you felt you’d seen enough at that point not to watch what happened next.’

Joanna looked at him, waiting.

‘Nothing happened, Joanna. She got changed, we talked, and she collected some of her things. I’m sorry you got the wrong idea. I can imagine how it must have looked.’

‘I was sure you’d sorted things out.’

‘Well, we didn’t. But I guess that will teach you to go around peeping through windows.’

‘I didn’t, well, I did, but it was just...’

Oliver smiled. ‘I’m teasing you. Peep all you like. I’ve nothing to hide.’

‘I didn’t want to knock, to cause trouble.’

‘Look, you don’t need to explain. You simply misunderstood what you saw. Now, maybe we can forget about it. I invited you here because I wanted to see you. Let’s not spend the evening arguing about something that didn’t happen. I’m sorry you doubted me, but that can’t be helped. Now, let’s try to forget about it.’

He raised his glass of wine. ‘To no more misunderstandings,’ he said.

Joanna smiled and raised her glass to his, but he couldn’t be sure that she’d forgotten.

Chapter Thirty

When Joanna awoke she found herself alone in Oliver Molloy's bed. She sat up, looked at her watch and found that it was just after nine o'clock. She threw back the covers and crept across the cold wooden floor to where she'd thrown her clothes on a chair and began to get dressed. An aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifted up from the kitchen as soon as she'd eased open the door. The drone of a radio presenter on an early morning talk show accompanied it. Joanna stepped into the landing and peered down through the banister, but there was no sign of Oliver and she went back into the bedroom, leaving the door ajar so that she might hear his approach.

She opened the wardrobe. On a few hangers, which swung and clanged together when she disturbed them, hung some blouses. A short silky skirt had fallen or had been flung on top of a row of shoes. But Mercedes had taken almost everything. Joanna leaned down and picked up a pair of red stilettos with peep toes. The heels were newly repaired and she sat on the side of the bed and slipped one on. It fit perfectly, but it was higher than what she was used to wearing and when she put on the other and stood, she wobbled before the mirror.

She examined her reflection in the glass. The red shoes were beautiful, too stylish for her skinny jeans. She thought about Mercedes and the type of woman she was – the type of woman on whom red stilettos never looked overdone. Joanna pulled her auburn hair back from her face. She wondered if Oliver compared them, if he favoured his wife's sensual style to her more youthful simplicity. Mercedes had not left behind many possessions, and yet her very essence seemed to linger in the room. Like the most potent perfume, it pervaded each crevice of the house and made it impossible to forget her. With a sigh, Joanna sat on the bed, slipped off the red shoes and wondered what it would be like to be the kind of woman who wore heels in the daytime.

Oliver looked up as she entered the kitchen. Seated at the kitchen table, he'd been reading the newspaper and drinking coffee.

'There you are. I have some coffee on,' he said. 'Can I make you some toast?'

'It's okay; finish your own. I'll get it myself,' she said.

'There's bread there. You'll find jam and cheese in the fridge, whichever you prefer. Or if you want there's cereal, but there isn't much milk.'

Joanna poured herself a coffee. She loaded two slices of bread into the toaster, and tried not to think about Oliver's wife and how she must have done this every morning whilst he drank his coffee.

'How would you feel about going on a trip today?' he asked.

Joanna turned to look at him. 'Where?'

Oliver rattled the paper shut and laid it to the side. 'I thought we might go to Belfast, maybe book into a hotel for the night and come back in the morning.'

'I'd love to. Would you believe I've never been? My mother always thought it was too dangerous. Of course she'd travelled up when the border was still there. She doesn't realise how much it's changed.'

'Yeah, it used to be pretty unnerving seeing those soldiers with guns alright. I always figured they were examining the car as soon as they saw the registration. Anyway, it's a good city. Grim, but interesting.'

They left shortly after breakfast. Joanna was excited at the prospect of going away with him. In another place, perhaps she could escape the presence of Mercedes. He asked her if she wanted to stop by her mother's house to pick anything up, but she said she wouldn't need much for one night. Whatever she wanted, she could get on the way. She wasn't sure she wanted her mother to meet him just yet.

They arrived in Belfast shortly after noon. He said he knew a good hotel, and she didn't ask any questions. He booked them a double room, and as she stood by the desk and watched him fill in the form, she found herself excited by the somewhat illicit nature of spending the night in a hotel with him. When the bellboy asked if he could take their bags, Oliver said it was okay, that they didn't have any luggage and Joanna had to suppress a giggle. She bought a toothbrush from a vending machine in the foyer, and they waited on the lift to take them to the fourth floor.

As soon as they entered the room, he kissed her. Joanna laughed and pushed him away to look around the room. There was no view from the window, just a yard where some cars were parked. She pulled the curtains and bounced onto the King-size bed.

'You stay right there,' Oliver told her as he went into the bathroom.

She undressed, lay on the bed in her underwear, and heard him run the water in the bathroom as she waited for him to return.

When he came out, he stood there for a moment and looked at her.

'I want to remember you just like this,' he said.

For some reason his words sent a cold wave through her.

‘You don’t have to remember. I’m here right now,’ she said.

He came towards her, ran his hands down her bare arms and kissed her. His hands were damp and made her shudder.

It was hot in the room, and they lay on top of the covers and made love. He was more tender than before, taking his time to explore her body, he ran his hands across her skin and awakened sensations that she hadn’t known till then. She wondered how many lovers he’d had and guessed that the answer was many. There were things that he asked her to do that with someone else she’d have been too embarrassed, but with him nothing was excessive. He guided her and like a somnambulist she followed.

She was aware as she touched him that Mercedes had done these things. She had hoped that in another place, she’d have been free of Oliver’s former lover, but instead she felt an affinity with the other woman. When she looked at her hands moving down his body, she imagined a different pair of hands and the eroticism of the fantasy took over. Closing her eyes, she moved against him. She imagined in that instant that she was Mercedes and the thought shattered any inhibition that she might otherwise have felt. Mercedes was beneath her skin, closer now than she was to Oliver, and it was almost with violence that she moved on top of him, hair swinging wildly in his face until they climaxed at almost the same time. Breathless, she looked down at him and laughed.

‘Maybe we should go away more often,’ he said. ‘Jesus.’

He ran a hand over his face, she rolled off him and laughing padded to the bathroom.

‘Won’t be long,’ she said.

She stood under the buzzing fluorescent light and examined herself in the mirror. Mascara was smudged beneath her eyes. Her face was flushed and her hair was charged with electricity, so that she resembled something wild. She did the best she could to restore normality, but her make-up was in her bag in the room, and so she dampened the corner of a towel and rubbed at the creases beneath her eyes where the make-up had settled and dampened her hair down with water. When she opened the bathroom door, he stirred, lying as she had left him on the bed.

‘God, I was almost asleep. What time is it anyway?’

Joanna crossed to the window and pulled one of the curtains back to check her watch. It was four in the afternoon and already the light outside had faded. She switched on a light by the bed.

While he was in the bathroom she dressed. Hunger gnawed at her stomach and when he reappeared with a towel about his waist, she suggested that they go out for something to eat.

He held her hand as they walked the city streets. She guessed that he wasn't afraid of meeting anyone that he knew in this city. She hoped that in the future they could do this in Dublin. As it was she was always conscious of the neighbours watching her come and go from the house. She felt that it was no coincidence that he suggested she arrive after dark. Her mother must have felt the same when she'd met Vince Arnold. They would never have had the opportunity to walk hand in hand like other young couples. Instead, she had had to settle for clandestine meetings in hotels. It must have made her feel frustrated being hidden away, a shadow in the background of Vince's life.

As they looked for a place to eat, Oliver mentioned that he needed to find a post box. There were some legal documents that he'd been supposed to send to a colleague. He crossed the street to drop the envelope in a red post box in the centre of the city whilst Joanna stopped to watch a busker who was playing violin outside a department store. A moment later she felt Oliver's hand on her shoulder.

'A few years ago a group of young activists were arrested for painting the post boxes in the north back to their original green,' he told her.

'Are you serious?'

'They said they were doing An Post a favour for when the country would be united. It's not an impossibility you know, if enough people North of the border wanted it, it would come to fruition. It says it in the Good Friday Agreement.'

'Can't see it ever happening though, can you? I mean it would have huge economical implications.'

Oliver shrugged.

'I wouldn't rule anything out.'

It was strange the differences in this city, she thought. It really did feel like another country. It wasn't just the red post boxes and the buses. She listened to the voices, too. Some of the accents were so strong that they might have been speaking a foreign tongue.

Oliver stopped to look down a side street off the main thoroughfare.

‘There used to be a little shop here...ah, that’s it. Come on.’

He tugged at her hand and brought her down the narrow street where a faded sign read “Harry Hall’s Bookshop”.

Oliver ducked through the door and Joanna followed. Instantly, they were met by the musty smell of old books that Joanna had loved since childhood. There were old and not so old books – covers varying from faded pink and green hardbacks to the creased but still glossy covers of recently read romance novels. Oliver ran his fingers along the books spines clearly in search of something while Joanna allowed her eyes to wander across the handwritten signs that differentiated genres. She wandered over to the crime fiction section and took down a book by John Connolly. Her eyes scanned the shelves and soon she’d amassed a pile of books, Hughes, Hunt, Nesbo, Le Carre. She took them to the cash register where Oliver had already finished making his purchase, and the old man at the desk smiled as she complimented the range of books he had available.

When the old man had carefully placed the books in a red and white striped supermarket bag, they left. Oliver stopped outside the door of the shop and pulled a book out of his own bag.

‘I got you something,’ he said.

Joanna looked at the cover, where a naked woman whose head was unseen sat in a Victorian armchair by a window. The title was “Henry and June” by Anais Nin.

‘She was a French writer. I think you’ll like her.’

Joanna thanked him, looked quickly at the blurb on the back of the book and put it in the striped bag with the others.

That night after they’d made love again and Oliver slept in the hotel bed, Joanna slipped from beneath the covers, sat on the toilet seat beneath the buzzing fluorescent light and read of Anais Nin’s obsession with the writer Henry Miller and his enigmatic wife. She likened it to her curiosity about Mercedes and wondered if Oliver had somehow been aware and in tune with her fantasy when they’d made love that afternoon.

Chapter Thirty-One

When Oliver pushed open the front door, it jarred. He gave it a small shove, knelt down and groped blindly for the papers that prevented the door from being opened. When he was inside he sifted through the flyers and envelopes until he found what he was looking for, the envelope written in Mercedes's handwriting. He threw down the other letters and with his key he made a jagged opening along the top of the envelope. He pulled out the neatly folded letter and began to read.

When he'd finished reading, he folded the letter again and returned it to the envelope. He was about to put it in the inside pocket of his jacket when he changed his mind, took the letter out again and crumpled it in his fist. His fingers closed tightly around the balled-up paper. Then, satisfied, he released it, put it on the tabletop and straightened it out. This time he didn't bother to put it back in the envelope but folded both haphazardly and stuck them in his pocket.

Tired from the drive home, he considered taking a rest, but he knew that Carmen would soon be in touch. She'd probably already called him while they were in Belfast. He'd switched off the phone just in case. Now he turned it back on and without hesitation dialled Carmen's number. The sooner the better he convinced her that Mercedes had been in touch.

The phone rang several times before Carmen answered. When she did her voice was husky as though she'd been sleeping.

'Carmen, it's Oliver. I've got some news. Can I meet you at the hotel?'

'What? Has she called? Where is she?'

'Look, I'll come over.'

'What did she say?'

'I didn't speak to her. She sent a letter.'

'A letter?'

'I'll show it to you when I get there. Are you at the hotel?'

'No, I'm not staying at the hotel now. I'm at a flat.'

'A flat? Whose flat is it?'

'I decided to rent a place. It was too expensive to stay at the hotel.'

Oliver paused.

'Okay, well give me the address.'

Carmen called out the address and he wrote it down. If she'd rented a flat, she must intend staying indefinitely. He wondered if showing her the letter would make a

difference. He hoped it would. He didn't like the idea of Carmen living so nearby. Somehow he had to convince her that it was unnecessary for her to stay in Dublin.

The flat was on the third floor of a grotty grey cement building close to the centre of the city. He pressed the button and waited for the lift. A few minutes later when there was no sound of it rattling its way towards the ground floor, he decided to take the stairs. He looked at the numbers on the doors of the flats. Down the hallway a door opened and a guy came out, shrugging into a leather jacket as he walked. His head dipped slightly in acknowledgement as he passed.

The numbers increased as he continued along the corridor. He paused at the door from which the guy in the leather jacket had emerged. It was number twenty, Carmen's flat. He rang the bell. There was the sound of shuffling inside, then he saw her shadow move beyond the frosted glass. The door opened. Carmen stood back and ushered him into a narrow hallway. Through an open door he could see an unmade bed. Clothes lay scattered on the floor. Carmen hadn't wasted much time in making the place her own.

'Who was that?' Oliver asked.

'Who was what?'

'The guy that I just saw leaving.'

Carmen smiled.

'Just a guy,' she said.

She sat at a small table by the window and tapped a cigarette from a tattered box. The air already smelled of cigarettes despite the no smoking signs that he'd seen in the corridors of the building.

'Did you bring the letter?' she said.

Oliver reached into his pocket, pulled out the crumpled paper and put it on the table in front of her. She straightened it out and immediately began to read. Oliver sat in a chair opposite and watched her expression change from one of eagerness to something that resembled remorse.

'She hates me.'

She looked up from the letter, but then her eyes were drawn back to the words. She pulled sharply on the cigarette, turned her head to the side and exhaled. Oliver looked around the room. He observed the old-fashioned bed-settee, the rips in the wallpaper. Carmen's suitcase lay on the floor, the contents spilling over the side.

‘Maybe she’ll come round. Right now she doesn’t want to speak to either of us,’ he said.

Carmen looked up suddenly.

‘Where did she send it from? Do you have the envelope?’

He nodded, took the envelope from his pocket and handed it to her.

‘She’s in Belfast, but there’s no return address,’ he said.

Carmen stared at the postmark on the envelope.

‘I’ll go there. Maybe I can find her,’ she said.

‘But you heard what she said, Carmen. She doesn’t want you to contact her.’

Carmen folded the letter, stood up and handed it back to him. She started to pace the room, the envelope still in her hand.

‘But if I could talk to her, maybe I could get her to listen.’

‘She doesn’t want to listen. You’d be wasting your time.’

She stopped in front of him.

‘Is that it then? You give up so easily, no?’

She had her hands on her hips and was staring up at him intently. He shrugged.

‘I can’t force Mercedes to come back. Doing that would just drive her further away. You know her, she doesn’t do anything that she doesn’t want to.’

‘I don’t care. I’m going to find her. If you give up so easily, maybe you don’t deserve that she comes back. Maybe I did you a favour, you’re a free man now.’

‘Don’t be absurd.’

There was a fire in her voice that made him want her. It was the same fire that he’d seen in Mercedes.

‘Look, Belfast is a big place. You’ll probably never find her.’

‘I don’t care. At least I’m doing something.’

Oliver wondered about the guy in the leather jacket. Where had Carmen met him? Had she confided in him about Mercedes? The jealous feeling that gripped him at the idea of Carmen with someone else surprised him.

He thought of the night that they had spent together. It was the only night that he and Mercedes had been apart since they’d been married and Carmen had been a willing substitute. Mercedes hadn’t had any qualms about leaving her sister and husband alone together when she’d left that morning. She’d gone to Cork to attend a training seminar for work. It was only one day. Carmen had spent two weeks with them sleeping in the spare room, and he had to admit there were nights, when

Mercedes had turned away from him, that he had thought about her sleeping beyond the wall.

Carmen had been a different kind of lover to Mercedes. She had no inhibition. There was urgency in her mouth and hands that was exciting and sometimes painful. She'd teased him the next day about telling Mercedes, but when Mercedes returned they acted as normal – at least he thought they had. Mercedes asked him if they had argued. When he asked her why, she said that she'd detected tension between them, that he had answered Carmen sharply when she'd spoken to him that day. He said that they'd had a minor disagreement, but that it was nothing to worry about. Carmen was just being her usual provocative self. He was relieved when a few days later, Carmen had returned to Spain without having said anything about what had happened between them. He had no idea that several months later, she would decide to tell her sister the truth.

He looked at Carmen now, standing by the window tapping her ash into a saucer.

'Maybe I'm starting to accept the fact that Mercedes is not coming back,' he said.

Carmen exhaled, not bothering now to turn her head to the side, and the smoke stung his eyes.

'And what will you do if she doesn't?'

'Carry on, I guess. There's nothing else to do.'

Carmen stubbed out her cigarette in the saucer, walked round the table and sat on the settee. He noticed again that her legs and feet were bare, and he wondered if she'd dressed hurriedly as soon as the guy had left. Had she been zipping up her skirt as he'd rung the doorbell? He sat down next to her.

'You know I admire your ferocity?' he said.

Carmen looked at him sharply and crossed her legs. He raised a hand and brushed her hair back from her face. She didn't flinch. Her eyes stared into his, but he couldn't read her expression.

'Do you think if it were the other way round Mercedes would look for you?'

'Of course she would. We're sisters.'

'You weren't too eager for her to come back that weekend though, were you? I haven't forgotten that weekend. In fact I've thought about it a lot.'

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing that we don't both want.'

Oliver put his hand on Carmen's shoulder and ran a thumb along her throat. She eased her head back and he caressed the nape of her neck. When he kissed her, her mouth was hot and tasted of cigarettes. He thought of the guy in the leather jacket and he wondered if she'd just had sex with him, but he didn't care. He wanted her. He wanted to feel the ferocity of her lovemaking that he'd felt that night, that he'd almost felt the previous night with Joanna. He pulled Carmen towards him and she yielded. Seconds later she was on top of him on the sofa, tugging at his belt. He put a hand on hers to stop her.

'The bedroom,' he said.

Carmen stood and led him to the room with the unmade bed and they fell together in the already tangled sheets.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Oliver had dropped Joanna home with the promise that he would call her soon. She didn't push him as to when exactly that would be. She felt confident that they had turned a corner during the time they'd spent in Belfast. And that it wouldn't be long before she'd hear from him again.

Her mother was not home when she arrived, but there was a message on the answering machine from Rachel Arnold telling Joanna that she'd like to see her again. Joanna wondered if her mother had already heard it. She wouldn't like that Rachel Arnold had called. Or that she wanted to see Joanna. Joanna erased the message and then sat down on the sofa to read the book that Oliver had given her.

When the phone rang about an hour later, Joanna expected that it might be Rachel again, but instead it was her mother telling her that she was going to eat out with a friend that evening. Joanna hung up, and thought about going back to her book, but she'd had enough of reading and she decided that she would call around to Rachel Arnold. Perhaps she would tell her more about Vince in the absence of Joanna's mother.

Joanna drew up outside Rachel's house. Her father's BMW was still parked in the driveway, and she glanced inside as she made her way to the front door. When she lifted the knocker the door shifted inwards and Joanna paused. She could hear Rachel Arnold's voice coming from the living room and she wondered if she had company. The temperature had dropped again. Joanna rubbed her hands together in an attempt to warm them, and then gently pushed the door further still. Heat emanated from the hallway. She knew that she ought to ring the doorbell, but paralysed by curiosity, she strained to hear the voices within. Without thinking she stepped into the warmth of the house.

'I need to see you. Yes, but how much longer?' Rachel said.

There was no reply. Joanna crept closer to the closed living room door to listen. Rachel did not have a visitor; instead she was on the phone.

'No, I know that...look...yes...but I could come to see you. No one would have to know...this hasn't been easy. To be honest sometimes I wish we'd never started...I know, you keep saying that, but it doesn't make it any easier. I'm beginning to think you're just making excuses.'

Rachel sounded desperate. Joanna tried to make sense of what she was hearing. She wondered if it was possible that Rachel Arnold had been having an affair.

‘Yes, but do you? Sometimes I think it would be better if we just forgot the whole thing, say that it had been a mistake. At least I wouldn’t have this awful guilty feeling all the time. It’s all right for you, you don’t have to...’

There was a ring at the doorbell. Joanna looked around frantically, but there was nowhere to hide. Rachel was still talking, but perhaps any minute she would hang up and emerge from the living room. Joanna crept back to the front door. She put her eye to the spy-hole and saw a man with a clipboard standing outside. The man leaned closer, and she pulled back just as the doorbell went again. She took a glance at the living room door and made a decision.

‘Yes?’ Joanna said.

The man smiled and began to tell her about cheaper electricity rates.

‘I’m sorry. I’m not interested,’ she said.

She closed the door, waited for the man to walk back down the path and then opened it again. Rachel was still talking on the phone. Joanna stepped outside and pulled the door behind her, leaving it ajar as it had been when she’d arrived. She waited for a few minutes before pressing the bell. Her feet were numb and she stamped them to bring the blood into them again. Inside a door opened and a moment later Rachel appeared.

‘I’m sorry for ringing so much, it’s just that the door was open and I thought there might be something wrong.’

‘No...no, everything’s fine. I was on the phone. I mustn’t have shut it properly when I came in. How stupid.’

Rachel fiddled with the lock, then stepped back and Joanna entered the hall once more.

‘I got your message,’ Joanna said.

Rachel walked into the living room ahead of her

‘I’m glad. I...would you like something to drink, tea?’

‘Sure, why not.’

Joanna sat on the sofa. Rachel disappeared through an adjoining door and Joanna could hear her run the tap and put the kettle on.

‘I can’t believe I left the door open, I must be losing my mind,’ Rachel called.

‘You should be careful. I mean it must be lonely now...here on your own.’

Rachel reappeared with a plate with some biscuits on it.

‘It’s quiet. And then sometimes I think I hear him...how careless...anyone could have walked in.’

Rachel set the plate down on the coffee table.

She had said in her voicemail that she’d like to see Joanna, but now she just seemed distracted. Joanna knew that she had obviously caught her at a bad moment, whoever Rachel had been talking to on the phone had set her on edge. She felt certain from the way that Rachel had accused him of ignoring her that it was a man, and she found herself looking around the room for signs of his presence.

The kettle clicked off in the kitchen and Rachel excused herself to make the tea.

‘Do you take sugar?’ Rachel called.

‘Just milk, thanks.’

Joanna had been looking at the cream phone sitting on the coffee table in the corner of the room since she entered. She listened to Rachel opening the cupboard doors in the kitchen and hurriedly she crossed the room, picked up the phone and pressed the redial button. There was a pause and just as she got a ring tone, she heard the rattle of delft and knew that Rachel was returning. Hurriedly she put the phone down and returned to her seat.

With trembling hands Rachel set the saucers down on the coffee table. Some tea had sloshed into one staining the white napkin that Rachel had placed between it and the cup. There were dark circles beneath Rachel’s eyes, and Joanna wondered what it was that prevented her from sleeping, Vince Arnold’s death, the guilt she felt over her affair with the man at the other end of the cream telephone, or the man’s refusal to see her now that she was free.

Joanna took a mouthful of tea, carefully replaced her cup and nodded to the framed picture of her father on the wall.

‘What was he like?’ she said.

‘Vince?’

‘Yes, Vince.’

Rachel gave her a quick smile.

‘He was charming. That’s the best word to describe him. Everyone took to him, and because of his charm they overlooked things.’

‘What kind of things?’

‘The less likable ones. Vince never did anything he didn’t want to do. He didn’t believe in compromise...if you didn’t see things his way he tried to bully you into it.’

Negotiation was out of the question. He let people down, but you know that already. Usually they forgave him. All he had to do was turn on the charm and everything else was forgotten.'

Joanna nodded.

'And you. Did you forgive him everything?'

Rachel sighed.

'I didn't know how to live without him.'

Joanna watched her closely. There was nothing to suggest that Rachel's behaviour was a performance. They both jumped a moment later at the high-pitched ringing of the phone. Rachel remained in her seat. Joanna looked from her to the phone.

'Aren't you going to answer it?'

'No, they can call back if it's important.'

They sat silently and waited for the ringing to stop. When it did, Rachel spoke again.

'I wanted to thank you for telling me.'

'Telling you what?'

'About Vince's visit to your mother.'

'My mother told you, not me.'

'Yes, but it was you who persuaded her to do so. She wouldn't have otherwise.'

Joanna shrugged.

'I just didn't want any more lies.'

Rachel looked uncomfortably at the flashing light on the answering machine signifying the missed call. Joanna laid her cup and saucer on the table.

'Would you mind if you use your bathroom?' she asked.

'Of course not. It's at the top of the stairs.'

Joanna thanked Rachel and went out to the hall closing the door behind her. She laid her hand on the navy sports jacket that hung from the knob of the banister, then put her face close to the fabric and inhaled the scent of expensive cologne embedded in the fabric. Upstairs, she opened and closed the bathroom door, but remained in the landing. She listened and heard Rachel in the kitchen below washing up their cups and moved as lightly as she could towards a door, which was slightly ajar at the front of the house. She pushed the door open and found herself looking into Rachel's master bedroom.

The bed, made up immaculately, was deep red adorned with red and cream satin cushions. The curtains were red, too and a thick ruby-coloured rug lay on the cream carpet. It looked like a room from one of those magazines that Joanna's mother loved to browse through. Quickly Joanna crossed the room and picked up the receiver of the phone that sat on the bedside locker. She pressed the redial button, and listened carefully for any sound of movement downstairs. The phone rang several times and then was picked up. Joanna waited for the person to say the customary 'hello', but the line buzzed with silence, and a moment later crackled and died. Joanna hung up and wondered what it meant.

In the landing, she eased open the bathroom door. She flushed the toilet, ran the tap and washed her hands. She dried them in a towel and wondered why someone would answer the phone and say nothing.

Rachel was sitting in an armchair in the living room when she returned. She had some kind of book in her hand when Joanna entered and she stood.

'I thought you might like to see this. It's one of Vince's albums. I think I told you that he liked to take photos. He was quite good at it.'

Joanna took the photo album from Rachel and opened it on the first page. There were pictures of racehorses, of smiling jockeys and athletes mid-way over hurdles. She turned the pages admiring her father's compositions, but her mind was on the phone. She was anxious that whoever had been on the other end of the line might call back. She didn't know whether or not Rachel's number was listed, and she didn't want to be there to arouse Rachel's suspicions should it happen. She flicked quickly through the pages of the album, and then closing it held it out to Rachel.

'I'd really like to look at them, but unfortunately I have to go. I promised my mother I'd collect her and I didn't realise it was so late.'

Rachel smiled.

'Take it with you,' she said. 'You can drop it back when you're finished. You might find it interesting.'

Joanna looked at the finger marks on the dusty navy cover and nodded.

'Thank you, I will,' she said.

Rachel saw her to the door. Joanna hurried to the car, the photo album tucked under her arm. When she started the engine Rachel was still standing in the doorway, the yellow light from the hall spilling out onto the tarmac, illuminating her father's

car. She sounded the horn and pulled away from the house, wondering as she did so if Rachel was already making another call.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When Oliver awoke Carmen was standing by the bed sorting through some clothes and throwing things into a sports bag.

‘Hey. What are you doing?’ he said.

She didn’t look up.

‘I’m going to look for my sister. Are you coming?’

He sat up, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and picked his jeans up from the floor.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

Carmen continued looking through the garments, which lay in a pile at her feet. She picked up a skirt. One of his socks had become entangled in it and she pulled it free and threw it on the bed.

‘Maybe you’re right. It’s better if I go alone. I have to talk to her. Maybe she won’t listen, but at least I’ll have seen her and know that she’s all right.’

She folded the skirt and put it in the bag.

Oliver pulled his clothes on. He put a hand on Carmen’s shoulder but she ignored it, zipped up her bag and left the room.

He listened to her moving around the living room. She was feeling guilty about last night. He could tell by her brusque manner. He had hoped that what had happened might change her mind about looking for Mercedes. If she had wanted to be with him so badly, wouldn’t she be happy that Mercedes was no longer there? He wondered if he’d misjudged her. Maybe she had wanted to sleep with him again in order to vindicate why she had done it to begin with, but instead it had served only as a reminder that they were the cause of what had happened, either that or she had found it a disappointment this time.

Oliver went into the bathroom and threw water on his face. Carmen was in the kitchen. He heard the surge from the tap and the water in the bathroom ran cold. He wondered what he could do to prevent Carmen from going to Belfast, but Belfast wasn’t the problem. It didn’t matter if she went there and returned without having found her sister. In fact if she went away for a few days it would give him more time to think of a plan to end her search for Mercedes.

He walked into the living room. Carmen’s sports bag was on the settee. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted from the tiny kitchen of the flat. He sat down at the table by the window and looked down at the grey city street below.

‘There’s coffee if you want it,’ she said.

He nodded.

‘Sit down, I’ll get it,’ he told her.

She didn’t object. She sat down with her own cup of coffee and he got up and went into the kitchen. When he returned she was sitting in the seat he’d vacated staring out the window smoking a cigarette. It occurred to him that he had never seen Carmen not smoking, and he wondered briefly how many she went through a day.

‘When are you leaving?’ he asked.

‘As soon as I’m finished.’

She sipped her coffee and tapped her cigarette on the saucer that was already full of last night’s ash.

‘I’ll give you a lift to the station if you want?’

She nodded. ‘Thanks.’

The silence was palpable. He wished there were some way that he could dispel the tension in the room.

‘If you find her, tell her I’m sorry,’ he said.

‘Do you think that will be enough?’

‘No. But it’s all I can say, isn’t it?’

Carmen stood up. She drained her coffee cup, and pulled twice on the cigarette before stubbing it in the saucer. He drank his coffee hurriedly, as anxious now as she was to be out of the flat.

In the car she didn’t speak. The traffic crawled along the quays until he branched off for Connolly Station. He was glad that it wasn’t far. This was a side of Carmen that he hadn’t seen before, a seriousness that had always been hidden beneath her flirtatious façade. He didn’t dislike it, but her need to be away from him made him feel uncomfortable and he thought that it was a good thing that she was going away.

He pulled up outside the station and they both got out of the car. He took Carmen’s bag from the boot and they stood there for a moment saying nothing.

‘You’ll give me a call if you find her?’ he said.

Carmen nodded. ‘I’ll let you know.’

He kissed her awkwardly on the cheek. She turned away from him and made her way hurriedly towards the escalator that would take her up to the station. A moment later she’d disappeared through the double doors without looking back.

Oliver sighed and got back into the car. He wondered how long Carmen would spend in Belfast looking for her sister. He felt a mild sense of guilt, knowing that he was the cause of this fruitless trip but there was nothing he could do about that. He just had to hope that Carmen would decide that her search was futile and that she'd give up looking for Mercedes.

He turned the car and drove back towards the house. He hadn't been alone for days and he found himself looking forward to the stillness, which he had dreaded in the initial weeks of Mercedes's absence.

The house was as he'd left it. The bag that he'd taken to Belfast lay beneath the stairs and he picked it up and carried it up to the bathroom. He caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror. He hadn't shaved and he wondered what the neighbours would have thought if they'd seen him. He wondered if they'd noticed Mercedes's absence by now, or whether they had mistaken Carmen for her sister. He took out his razor, filled the sink and lathered foam onto his skin. Carefully, he dragged the razor along his jaw, then dipped it in the water, and repeated the movement. He remembered Mercedes shaving him once. He'd been nervous and she'd laughed at him.

'What - you think I'm going to cut you?' she said.

He didn't. Not on purpose anyway, but if he moved unexpectedly it would have been easy for the blade to nick his skin no matter how steady her hand. He had felt completely at her mercy. It was a feeling alien to him and he didn't like it. He knew that Mercedes had liked the intimacy of it, but it made him feel vulnerable and it was the only time he'd allowed her to do it. If she were here now, he thought, she would gladly cut him.

He towelled off his face and went into the spare bedroom. He had thought about moving into this room, so that he didn't have to think about Mercedes. He looked at the double bed. The sheets had not been changed since Carmen had stayed. He decided that he would strip the covers and move his things into this room. He couldn't escape the memories in the house, not unless he sold up and moved somewhere else. It was a thought that appealed to him, but he knew that it would look odd to those who thought that Mercedes had so recently left him.

The house had never been in Mercedes's name. That was one thing he was glad about. He had bought it before they'd met and she had never raised the question. When the time came he could sell it without her signature on the contract. But not

yet, he would wait until a respectable period of time had passed and then he would think about moving to a place where no one knew him and he could try to start anew.

He noticed that the red light was flashing on the answering machine by the bed. Someone had phoned while he was in the shower. He threw the towel down and walked round to where the phone sat on the locker. He picked up the receiver and punched in the code. A woman's voice told him that she was leaving a message for Mercedes Hernandez. She was from a bookshop and wanted to inform Mercedes that the books that she'd ordered had now arrived. She could collect them whenever it was convenient for her to do so. Oliver erased the message and sat there looking at the phone. He wondered briefly what books Mercedes had ordered. It must have taken a long time for the bookshop to get them in. Perhaps he would pick them up the next time he was passing. He didn't know why, but it seemed suddenly like an important thing to do.

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was the day before the exhibition and Joanna had stayed up late the previous night preparing her photograph collection. She'd sprayed each photo with adhesive and attached it to its foam core frame, careful to ensure that it was placed correctly before covering it with matt. She'd stood back and appraised the moody brides who glared from their frames with disdain, enraged by their capture. That morning she'd loaded them into the car and taken them to the college to be mounted in the auditorium.

She was standing assessing the finished effect when someone spoke from behind.

'Nice work.'

She turned to find a guy she had no recollection of having seen before standing at her shoulder.

'Thanks,' she said. 'Are you exhibiting too?'

'Hopefully. If I can ever manage to get this lot sorted out.'

He was tall, his shoulder-length brown hair brushing the collar of his long black coat. Joanna didn't recognise him from any of her classes. She watched him as he carefully propped two cases of framed works against the wall where her exhibition ended. He straightened and extended a hand.

'What's your name?'

'Joanna.'

'Good to meet you, Karl's my name. I'm doing the evening course. And you, are you full-time?'

'Yes – actually it's my last year.'

'Yeah? Me too.'

Karl had walked over to her photos and was examining them closely. He was the first person to have seen the complete collection mounted, the other students were too busy scurrying around organising their own work. Joanna stood behind him and chewed nervously at the corner of her lip as he leaned in close to examine the photo of the bride sitting on the windowsill with the suitcase beneath.

'Really great contrast in this one,' he said. 'Great angle, too.'

He ran a hand through his hair and moved on to the bride in doc martin boots walking in a narrow street, the battered suitcase in her hand. He nodded in appreciation and said something about symmetry, but she didn't hear because just then her phone started ringing. She apologised, pulled the phone from the pocket of

her fleece and saw Oliver's name flash on the screen before her. She turned away to answer.

'Hey Oliver. How are you?'

She watched as Karl made his way over to the case that he'd placed against the wall, crouched down and began unloading his photographs.

'I'm at the college getting everything ready for tomorrow. I've just finished mounting the shots...yes, it's pretty exciting. Lunch?' She looked at her watch. 'Yes, I should be able to get out of here pretty soon. Maybe an hour or so. Okay, great, I'll see you then.'

She hung up. Karl had spread some of his pictures against the wall. He'd just hung the second one and was straightening it. Unlike her chiaroscuro shots, Karl had opted for colour. The one he'd just hung fascinated her and she stepped closer to take a look. The photo was of a mime artist sitting on a bench in a city street. His face was painted white, his lips black, and on his knee was a red beret from which he was counting coins. He had the saddest face she'd ever seen.

'Wow. Where did you take that? It's wonderful.'

'Paris. It could be anywhere, but yeah, Paris...I like to take street scenes...things that people tend to miss when they're rushing to wherever they're going. So many people never really stop to look, you know.'

Karl's other pictures were of random people, some in Paris, some in Dublin – a tale of two cities - a child busking in Grafton Street, two homeless men sleeping head to head on a bench on the Liffey boardwalk. The only parts of them visible their tousled heads and dirty runners poking from the ragtag of blankets that covered them. She particularly liked a shot of a young woman sitting for an artist in a street in Paris, her wistful expression captured in grey charcoals on the white sheet propped on the artist's easel. The artist wore a heavy coat and fingerless gloves. The girl, incongruously, had removed her coat to reveal a simple woollen dress. The bare trees and white sky confirmed that it was winter.

'I really like this one. Did you go to Paris just to take the shots?'

'No. My mother lives there, so I visit quite a bit.'

'She's French?'

'No, but she married a French guy – Clement.'

He made a face.

'You don't like him?'

Karl shrugged. 'He's okay, I guess.'

He turned away to hang the picture that she spoke of, and then stood back to examine the effect.

'Since you've so efficiently finished with your lot, do you fancy giving me a hand here?' he said.

Joanna checked her watch. She still had plenty of time before she was due to meet Oliver, so she smiled and said why not, and they spent the next hour positioning and repositioning Karl's photographs until they both felt that the overall composition was just right.

'Okay, I think I owe you a coffee,' he said, as they hung the last picture.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I'd love to but I've arranged to meet someone for lunch,' she said.

Karl waved away her apology although she thought he looked disappointed.

'Don't worry. Maybe another time?' he said.

'Sure, why not.'

Joanna smiled. She'd enjoyed helping him with the pictures. She hadn't made too many friends during the course and she was sorry that he'd not been in her class. Now she packed away her things, aware that she was already going to be a little late to meet Oliver.

'Okay, that's it. I'll see you tomorrow,' she said.

Karl nodded. When she reached the door, she looked back. Karl was looking after her. He smiled and raised a hand.

Oliver was already seated and studying the menu when she arrived at the café.

'I'm sorry, I got caught up for longer than I expected,' she said.

He smiled and stood to kiss her cheek. 'That's okay. I just got here. Are you hungry?'

'I hadn't thought about it, but yes, I guess I am. I've been too nervous and excited about the exhibition tomorrow to think of much else.'

'It's tomorrow?'

'Yes, I thought I told you that.'

'You probably did. I've just had a lot on...so you got the collection finished...everything's ready?'

'It's all done. You are coming, aren't you?'

There was a pause.

‘I hope so...to be honest there’s this case. The client is very demanding, so hopefully I’ll manage to get out of work on time.’

‘I see.’

He put his hand on her arm. ‘Listen, I’ll do my best,’ he said.

Joanna forced a smile and the waitress appeared to take their order.

‘I went over to see Rachel Arnold last night,’ Joanna told him.

‘Oh?’

‘When I arrived the door was open and I heard voices inside, well, a voice – Rachel’s – don’t judge me on this, but I stepped into the house to listen. It was risky, I know, but I wanted to find out who she was talking to.’

‘And did you?’

‘That’s the thing. She was on the phone. The person she was talking to, she seemed desperate to see them. It sounded like they didn’t want to. Then she said that she was sorry they’d ever started whatever it was they were talking about. It sounded like she was talking to a man, like she might have been having an affair. I don’t know what to think about it.’

Oliver didn’t answer immediately.

‘What makes you think it was a man?’

‘I don’t know, the fact that he wouldn’t see her, that she sounded so frustrated.’

Oliver thought about this for a few minutes.

‘Maybe, but it could be something else.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, I didn’t tell you this before, but the evening I met you at the church, Rachel Arnold asked me if I’d drop by the house. She wanted my advice. It turns out that your father had a gambling problem. He owed a lot of money to some, shall we say, unsavoury people.’

‘And why did she tell you that? I mean...what could you do about it?’

‘Nothing, but she knew I was a solicitor, and she wanted to know if she ought to pay this money.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘I said she should pay it as soon as the insurance money comes through. That or sell up and leave town.’

‘But I don’t understand, why do you think the person on the phone might have had something to do with that?’

‘I don’t know. It’s just a possibility, I guess. Maybe she intended borrowing the money to pay these guys off – maybe the guy – if it was a guy – on the phone had his own conditions.’

Joanna thought about that. ‘She didn’t tell me he had a gambling problem,’ she said.

‘Why would she?’

‘True. But I don’t think it was that. I get the feeling it was a man and that she was involved with him. Maybe she was having an affair when Vince died. Maybe that’s why she feels guilty.’

‘Does she?’

‘She said so on the phone. She said she wished they hadn’t started it.’

‘Hmmm. Well, who knows what was going on? I suppose if she was unhappy with Vince, maybe because of this gambling problem, she may have started something. Does it bother you?’

‘I don’t know. I’d just like to know what’s going on with her. I don’t know why, I mean, it doesn’t make any difference. Vince is dead. And the way my mother and Rachel describe him, I suppose no one would blame Rachel if she had been having an affair. Maybe Vince got what he deserved in the end – maybe Rachel just couldn’t tolerate it anymore.’

‘You’re not suggesting...’

‘God no, I don’t suspect she did anything to him. That wasn’t what I meant. I just thought that, well, Vince cheated everybody, but...you don’t think, I mean...if she was having an affair...’

‘What? That she’d have had someone harm him? I doubt it. According to Rachel, the coroner’s report said it was accidental. There is the question about the guys he owed the money to, and with Vince dead, they know that Rachel is coming into a sum of money. But if she suspected that they’d had a hand in what happened to him, I’m sure she’d have told the Guards.’

‘Maybe she was afraid to.’

‘It’s possible. But she’d want justice done, wouldn’t she, if she thought that someone had murdered her husband?’

‘Unless, she’d had a hand in it, if this man she was involved with...’

‘Joanna, you don’t know that Rachel is involved with anyone. You’re driving yourself mad over a snippet of conversation you overheard. I really think you’re worrying about nothing.’

‘Well, I wasn’t worried about anything like that, I thought she might have been having an affair, but none of that other stuff had crossed my mind. I kind of wish you hadn’t told me.’

‘Look, if you’re so concerned about it, why don’t you ask her?’

‘I couldn’t do that.’

‘Okay then, maybe not blatantly, but you could try to get closer to her. She might tell you about the gambling thing, and you’d be in a better position to judge.’

‘To judge what?’

‘Whether Rachel Arnold is capable of having someone kill her husband.’

‘Oh, I don’t think she is. That was just stupid. Like you said I got carried away. But I do think she’s involved with someone. And in all honesty, I guess Vince Arnold deserved that given what he did to both Rachel and my mother.’

Oliver checked his watch.

‘Do you have to be back at work?’

Oliver nodded. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Well, hopefully you can make it to the exhibition tomorrow evening. It starts at six.’

‘I’ll try my best.’

They both stood up. Oliver took the receipt and paid the bill. Outside the café, he leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips.

‘It’s good to see you. Don’t drive yourself crazy worrying about the Rachel Arnold thing. I’m sure it’s nothing. Nothing as serious as murder anyway.’

He smiled.

‘I do get a bit carried away sometimes,’ she said. ‘I think I’m just stressed about the exhibition.’

‘Don’t worry. It’ll be great,’ he said.

He kissed her again, turned away and walked in the direction of his office.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Oliver sighed and shifted position, moving a step closer to the fat American woman who'd been holding up the queue for at least ten minutes. 'Maybe it's *Reid* with double *e* instead of *ie*. I know it's something like that,' she said. The assistant frowned and pounded on the keyboard. She shook her head. 'No, I'm afraid there's nothing coming up on the system,' she said. The fat woman sighed. 'Oh well, that's a shame. Also, I was wondering, do you have any books by James Joyce?' Oliver coughed and attempted to make eye contact with the assistant. She ignored him. 'Yes, if you go to the ground floor and look in the Irish Fiction section you should find what you're looking for,' she said. Finally the woman picked up her shopping bags and turned away from the counter. One of the bags knocked against Oliver as she passed, but she didn't apologize. 'Some people,' he said, as he stepped forward.

The assistant smiled briefly, but didn't comment.

'I'm here to collect some books for my wife. She got a call to say they were in.'

'Okay, and what's your wife's name?'

'Mercedes. Mercedes Hernandez.'

The assistant stooped under the counter and took out two books. He could see a yellow post-it stuck to one. It had Mercedes's name on it.

'Would you like a bag for them?' the assistant asked.

'That would be great. How much is that?'

The girl told him the price and he handed her the money.

'Do you happen to know when my wife ordered these books?'

'One second and I'll find out for you.'

She went back to the computer and typed something in. Oliver waited, curious to see what books Mercedes had ordered. He assumed that they were from one of the obscure Spanish writers that she liked to read and that they'd had to be tracked down.

'Yes, she ordered them almost two weeks ago. Sometimes it takes a while to get them in. Do you want to check and make sure they're the ones that she was looking for?'

'No, no that's okay. I'm sure they're fine. Are you sure it was just two weeks ago?'

'Yes. It says it here – February nineteenth.'

Oliver nodded. The assistant handed him the bag. 'If there's anything wrong, tell your wife that she can return them.'

‘I’m sure they’re fine,’ he said, and hurried out of the shop.

As soon as he was outside, he took one of the books from the bag. It was *The Shadow of the Wind* by Ruiz Zafron, the Spanish writer. It didn’t surprise him, but Mercedes could not have ordered the books only two weeks before. There had to be a glitch in the computer system. It was odd, the girl had seemed so sure when she’d told him. He should have asked her if she remembered Mercedes being in the shop and asking her to order them. She would have seen a lot of customers, but perhaps she would have recalled the Spanish girl with the beautiful smile. He imagined Mercedes browsing the shelves, her fingers trailing along the spines of the books. She would falter at the letter *R*, and then not finding what she was looking for would continue her search until the letter *Z* confirmed the absence of the coveted writer.

He considered returning to the shop, but the assistant already seemed curious and he didn’t want to attract unnecessary attention, so he pushed on. It was beginning to rain. People hurried towards their destinations, raising their umbrellas as they walked. He made his way down Grafton Street and decided to cut through St. Stephen’s Green Park in order to get back to the car.

He walked along the path by the duck pond. He was walking fast swinging the paper bag with Mercedes’s books when he saw her. He faltered. Her back was to him and she was throwing bits of bread from her bag to the waiting ducks at the edge of the pond. Her name caught in his throat and he wondered whether he should turn and go as fast as he could in the other direction, but then it was too late. Feeling his eyes on her, she turned and he saw that it was not Mercedes, but Carmen. She was wearing the clothes belonging to Mercedes that he’d given her the night that she’d got caught in the rain. He tried to recover himself, hoping that she hadn’t seen the look of shock on his face just as she’d turned. He’d never thought that he would confuse Carmen with Mercedes, despite their similarities. He guessed that it was the fading light that had tricked him. That and the fact that he had not expected to come upon Carmen so unexpectedly.

‘I didn’t know you were back,’ he said.

She eyed the bag in his hand. Then continued to feed the ducks with the last of the bread. They gathered round her as she shook the crumbs to them.

‘I got back this morning. I was going to call you.’

He nodded. ‘Did you see her?’

‘Yes.’

The silence hung between them. He was aware of Carmen's eyes studying his face. He searched for the right words to say, but Carmen was the first to break the silence.

'You look surprised, Oliver.'

'Belfast is a big place. How did you manage to find her?'

'It wasn't so hard. I checked out the hotels in the city, decided which ones she was likely to stay at and then went and asked them. I found her at only the fourth one. I was lucky, no?'

Carmen knelt and clicked her fingers. The ducks gathered round scrabbling for the bread that they thought she was about to feed them. When they realised that she didn't have any they dispersed.

She looked directly at Oliver as she straightened.

'Aren't you going to ask me what she said?'

Oliver kicked at the ground. He wasn't sure what it was that Carmen was playing at but instinct told him if he went along with it, it could be worthwhile.

'Did you tell her I was sorry?' he said.

'She wasn't interested. She said that she's moved on, that she doesn't need you.'

Carmen tossed her head as if they were her own words.

'Is that right?'

Oliver took a step closer to Carmen to gauge her reaction. He could see how he'd mistaken her for Mercedes in the fading light, but up close their disparities were plain and they were what drew him to her. He leaned closer, removed an imaginary leaf from her hair and flicked it aside. Carmen ignored his closeness. He admired this new coolness. It was studied, planned and she was getting the reaction that she wanted without realising that she too was being lured. She had probably spent time alone in her hotel room devising this new strategy. That was if she had been alone. He wasn't sure why, but he had a fleeting memory of the guy in the leather jacket that he'd seen leaving Carmen's flat that day and it caused him a moment of doubt. Still, he didn't believe that Carmen was indifferent towards him. He knew her too well, and would confirm it before the night had ended.

Carmen stamped her feet and blew on her hands.

'Let's walk,' she said. 'I'm freezing.'

They began to follow the path towards the exit. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the park and he hoped that the gatekeeper had not locked them in unwittingly. He quickened his step and Carmen matched his stride. The rain was starting to get

heavier, large drops fell in the pond sending ripples round the ducks making them bob on the water.

‘So what else did Mercedes have to say?’ he asked.

‘She said she doesn’t want anything from you. All that she wants is whatever belongs to her.’

Oliver nodded. ‘She took most of her things when she left, but the rest I’ll pack and send them on.’

Carmen shook her head.

‘She doesn’t want you to know where she’s staying, besides she doesn’t have a long-term address and you can’t send them to the hotel. She hasn’t decided what she’s going to do yet. Maybe she will stay here, maybe she will go back to Spain. I don’t know. She wants you to withdraw the money from your joint account and send her what’s hers.’

He hadn’t been expecting that.

‘That’s fine. I’ll write her a cheque,’ he said.

‘No, she wants cash.’

‘How can I give her cash when she won’t agree to meet me?’ he said.

‘She wants me to meet her with the money next week.’

Oliver laughed.

‘What? So she’ll meet you, but not me? The last time I checked we were in this together. Why has she suddenly forgiven you?’

Carmen shrugged. ‘We’re sisters.’

The gates were open. They paused outside, and Carmen told him that her bus was in the opposite direction.

‘It’s dark. I’ll drive you home,’ he said.

She didn’t object, so he put his hand beneath her elbow and guided her in the direction of the car.

He wondered when she’d decided to concoct this story. Had she really gone to Belfast, and if so how much time had she spent searching for Mercedes? He didn’t care about the money. Carmen could have it if she wanted, but was that her motive for telling him that Mercedes never wanted to see him again, or had she decided that Mercedes’s absence yielded more benefits than her return? Whatever her reasons, Carmen’s lies could serve as a worthy alibi if anyone started to question him about Mercedes’s sudden disappearance. As they got into the car, he remembered that he

was supposed to be at Joanna's exhibition in an hour's time. He looked at Carmen Hernandez in the passenger seat beside him, and he knew that he wasn't going to make it.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Already the room was thronging with people. Mostly they were friends and relatives of the students, but there were others, too, who had seen the exhibition advertised and had wandered in off the street. It was an exhilarating and unnerving experience to move amongst the crowd and listen to their comments.

Joanna kept watching the door for Oliver. She hadn't heard from him and assumed that his silence meant that he was going to make it. Perhaps he was, at that moment, caught in traffic on the way out of the city. She knew what it could be like at peak time.

Next to her Karl was discussing his photos with two bohemian-looking girls who she'd seen around the college and believed were art students. They were hanging on his explanations – and she wondered if it were the pictures or Karl that they were interested in. Whatever the attraction she knew their type - pretentious to the core. But Karl seemed to be enjoying the attention and she turned away to check the door again wondering if Oliver would show up.

She was wandering around the room looking at the other students' collections whilst occasionally glancing at the door when she saw Rachel Arnold come in. She had called to invite her the previous night, but she hadn't really expected her to come. A man held the door open for Rachel, and it took Joanna a moment to realise that they were together. They stood looking around the room and rather than going to meet them Joanna decided to observe them until they had noticed her, which Rachel did after a short time. She waved and touched the man's elbow. Joanna watched them making their way through the crowd. Rachel walked ahead with the man following closely behind her. Surely she hadn't decided to bring her lover to the exhibition?

'Sorry, we're late,' Rachel apologised. 'The traffic was really bad. Are these your pictures?'

'No. No, mine are just over here. Come on and I'll show you.'

Joanna was aware of Rachel and the stranger walking closely behind her as she led the way to her collection. Karl smiled at her as she passed. The hippy girls had moved on and he was standing idly by his photographs. She'd have liked to stop to talk to him. Instead she was nervously leading Rachel Arnold and her friend – or accomplice - to view her work.

Rachel stepped close to the photographs and studied them in detail. The man stood next to her, but spent less time on each one. Joanna got the impression he was just looking at them out of politeness.

‘They’re wonderful,’ Rachel said. ‘I love the atmosphere, the contrast between the bride and the graffiti in the street...and the light in this one...’

She stepped towards the picture of the bride in the window.

‘Her face, it’s so full of yearning,’ she said.

When Joanna glanced at the man she found him staring at her. He smiled, but she didn’t smile back. She was waiting for Rachel to introduce him, but so far she hadn’t attempted to do so, and she was disinclined to initiate the introduction.

‘Did it take you long to put the collection together?’

Joanna turned back to Rachel. ‘I’ve been working on it since the beginning of the semester. I took literally hundreds of pictures. These are the ones that I felt captured the meaning – that not every bride is a happy one.’

Rachel nodded, but if she noticed any implication in Joanna’s comment, she refused to acknowledge it.

‘You’ve a real talent,’ she said. ‘Just like he had...did you...had you a chance to look at the album?’

The man had moved off to look at another collection. Joanna had been watching him as Rachel was speaking. He was striking, tall and broad-shouldered in his dark suit. He looked younger than Rachel and she wondered if it was possible that they were having an affair.

‘I didn’t get the chance, but I will. I’ll drop it back of course when I’ve done so.’

Rachel nodded and glanced round the room.

‘Is your mother here?’ she said.

‘She was here earlier. She’s not so keen on crowds, so I brought her in before we’d officially opened. You should get a glass of wine. They’re serving it over there. There are a few snacks, too.’

‘Yes, I might do that. I’ll just see where Patrick’s got to.’

Patrick. It was the first time Rachel had made reference to him. Joanna was about to repeat the name, but Rachel had already moved away and she was not about to stop her. She saw Rachel approach the table where glasses of red wine were lined up. The man, Patrick, had struck up a conversation with another man. Rachel touched his arm

and handed him a glass of wine. He smiled, and seemed to introduce her because she said something and smiled briefly.

Joanna was still watching Rachel's interaction with the man when Karl spoke next to her.

'Was that your mother?' he said.

'What? No, long story.'

'I've got time on my hands,' he said.

He smiled and Joanna smiled back.

'Maybe some other time,' she said. 'What time is it anyway?'

Karl looked at his watch. 'Almost seven thirty. Not long to go.'

Joanna looked at the door again, and then glanced at her phone, but she didn't have any missed calls or messages. Damn Oliver. He could have made an effort.

'Most of them are going for a drink afterwards. Are you going?' Karl asked.

She wasn't much in the mood, but she'd already told some of her classmates that she'd join them, and she didn't intend sitting around waiting for Oliver to call.

'I'll go for a while,' she said. 'And you?'

'I might just go for one.'

She'd lost sight of Rachel Arnold and the man. The crowd was beginning to disperse now and she wondered if they'd left without saying goodbye. One of her lecturers came over and started talking to both she and Karl, and a few minutes later she felt someone touch her elbow and she turned to find Rachel standing next to her. There was no sign of her companion.

'I'm sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to let you know that we're going. Thank you so much for the invite. I hope to see you soon.'

Rachel's hand was on her arm. She nodded and thanked her for coming, aware of Karl and her lecturer continuing the conversation next to her. She wanted to ask Rachel Arnold who the man was, but it wasn't the right moment. There was no time for questions, and suddenly she was watching Rachel's figure retreating towards the door where undoubtedly the man was waiting for her. She glanced at her phone. A message had come in without her noticing. She clicked on the icon and saw that it was from Oliver. "Sorry. Can't get away." No apology, not even a smiley face, she thought. He could have taken a moment to call.

An hour later she found herself in a crowded pub with the other students and some of the lecturers. A few students had left before the exhibition had ended and secured

a table, but there was only space for six people and everyone else stood around awkwardly, constantly moving to make way for people either going to or coming from the bar with drinks. It was impossible to have a conversation with more than one person and Joanna found herself once more in the company of Karl.

He talked animatedly about cameras and expeditions he'd been on with and without the college. He told her he'd got a few jobs taking pictures at friends' weddings in the last few months, but admitted that it wasn't what he wanted to do. His dream was to be a photojournalist, to travel all over the globe taking pictures that told news stories. He wanted to highlight the plight of people in need of aid.

'Take Afghanistan,' he said. 'I want to travel to places like that to capture the atrocities and show people what's happening over there.'

Karl was leaning in close in order to talk above the music. She could feel the heat of his breath on her face. He certainly liked to talk.

'And you? What are your plans when you finish?'

Joanna admitted that she didn't really know yet what she wanted to do. She loved taking pictures, but she hadn't decided what kind of photographer she wanted to be.

'Like you, I want to show the truth in my pictures. I like street shots, pictures that don't try to manipulate the truth; documentary photography, but on the other hand I like stylisation, too. I mean that's what my exhibition tonight was all about.'

She had become so involved in the conversation that she hadn't had time to think any more about Oliver or of Rachel Arnold's appearance at the exhibition. That was until Karl reminded her.

'So, who was that woman then?' he asked.

Joanna sighed.

'My father's wife.'

'Ah, the wicked stepmother.'

'Not really, I mean...she seems okay. I only met her recently. If you don't mind, though, I'd rather talk about something else.'

Karl nodded and obliged.

By the time he walked her to her car a few hours later, she felt she knew him pretty well. He reiterated his invitation for coffee and she agreed to meet him. He was funny and passionate about photography. She didn't want to tell him about her father, or Rachel Arnold. What she needed was a departure from all of that.

As she was driving home the phone blipped. She pulled into the hard shoulder to check it, thinking that it was probably Oliver. No one else would text that late at night, but instead it was Karl. “Great talking tonight. Coffee soon,” it said. She responded and drove on, her thoughts directed towards Oliver. He wasn’t working now and he hadn’t even sent her a text to see how the exhibition had gone. She began to wonder if her mother had been right. Perhaps getting becoming involved with him had been hasty, but it wasn’t too late to repent.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Oliver sat on the edge of the bed and watched Carmen sleep. She looked different when she was sleeping. Her face lost some of its fierceness, and bereft of make-up she looked almost innocent. He stood up and eased his clothes on. He heard her breathing change and for a moment he thought she might wake, but she settled again and he stole quietly from the room.

They hadn't pulled the curtains in the living room and the greyness of the opaque sky seeped through the net curtain and emphasised the starkness of the flat. He stood looking out the window at the jackdaws that picked at the fast food wrappers in the street and he wondered how long Carmen would stay in this place.

In the kitchen he filled the coffee maker. He still hadn't figured out Carmen's motive for saying that she'd met Mercedes. A part of him wondered if Carmen suspected what had happened. Maybe her revelation had been intended to shock him into some kind of confession, to catch him unaware. How would she have reacted if he had just blurted it out, if he'd told her that she couldn't have seen Mercedes, that it was impossible? He had been close to it. He had willed himself not to speak. To say nothing was the only way to maintain his composure. It struck him that Carmen might not be shocked. She was a woman capable of unscrupulous acts, but none as horrifying as murder. There were times when the weight of what he'd done became so intolerable that he thought he couldn't go on. He told himself over and over that it had been an accident. He repeated it until his instinct for self-preservation kicked in and propelled him forward, and he knew that he had no choice but to go on.

'I didn't hear you get up.'

Oliver jumped at the sound of Carmen's voice in the doorway.

'I didn't want to wake you,' he said.

Carmen was in her dressing gown. Her hair was tousled and her face clean of make-up. It occurred to him again how young she looked, so different from the dark-eyed, red-lipped temptress she liked to paint herself as.

'Go on, sit down and I'll get you a coffee,' he said.

She smiled and sauntered back to the living room.

When he entered with the coffee she was sitting at the table by the window and she had taken one of the books from the paper bag that he'd left there without thinking.

'You picked up my books,' she said.

He placed the coffee carefully before her.

‘The book shop phoned, they said they were for Mercedes.’

She nodded. ‘I ordered them. When they asked me my name they found Hernandez on the system and asked me if I were Mercedes. It was easier to say yes, she had an account set up already. I hate all that red tape.’

Oliver had often ordered books from that store. He knew that you didn’t have to set up any account. You simply supplied them with your name and telephone number, but he said nothing. Maybe masquerading as Mercedes gave Carmen some sense of worth, of satisfaction. Mercedes had always claimed that Carmen had been envious of her. He eyed her across the table. She had already opened the book on the first page and was reading. She closed it a minute later and held it up so that he could see the cover.

‘I love this writer,’ she said. ‘He’s so passionate. His words are like music.’

He thought of Mercedes, the nights that she had sat up late in bed reading and he’d complained about the lamp keeping him from getting to sleep. He’d bought her a reading torch, but she didn’t use it. She said she didn’t want to strain her eyes by reading in the dull light.

Carmen put the book on the table.

‘Would you like some toast?’ she said.

‘Yes. I thought maybe you hadn’t had time to get anything in since you came back.’

‘I hadn’t, just bread.’

She got up. He watched her move across the room. Her legs were bare beneath her short dressing gown. On her feet she wore pink furry slippers, the kind that Mercedes used to wear. He listened to her move about the tiny kitchen and he wondered if this was what she had wanted, the two of them having breakfast like any couple.

She emerged a few minutes later with a tray of toast with jam and butter. The smell filled the room and reminded him of other winter mornings. Carmen sat opposite him. He looked at her and wondered if he’d met Carmen rather than Mercedes on the train that day, would he have asked for her number instead? Something told him that he would have, but she would still have led him to Mercedes. The link between them could not be severed. The choices that he made would still have been the same, but perhaps it would have ended differently.

He looked at Carmen buttering toast opposite him. He ought to hate her. If it hadn’t been for her none of it would have happened. Mercedes would still have been

alive and they would be living as they had been, but as that thought crossed his mind, so too did the reality of what things had been like between he and Mercedes in the months leading up to that night. He remembered her coldness. How she'd moved away from him when he'd attempted to touch her. He'd given up out of pride. They were like strangers, only they lacked the chemistry that could exist between strangers – the curiosity about the unknown. No, if it hadn't been Carmen, it would have been someone else. Mercedes didn't deserve what had happened, but she wasn't blameless either.

'So, when will you see Mercedes?' he asked.

'Next week, whenever you have the money,' she said.

Oliver nodded.

'I should be able to get it for you tomorrow. We signed some cheques in advance, so I don't need her signature on anything.'

'She doesn't want a cheque. She specified cash,' she said.

'It's twelve thousand euro, Carmen. You're hardly going to get the train to Belfast with twelve thousand euro in your back pocket now, are you?'

'It'll look strange though, no? Why would Mercedes make a cheque out to herself?'

'True. And I suppose she doesn't want any trouble cashing it. I'll tell you what - I'll make the cheque out to you. That way you can give her the money and there won't be any questions asked.'

Carmen nodded and bit into her toast. She didn't question his readiness to write the cheque, and he wondered again what the money was for. He figured it was something specific, that she hadn't just decided to rob her sister of her savings without good reason. Again he contemplated the possibility that she suspected the truth; that she knew that Mercedes was unlikely to turn up demanding to know where her twelve thousand euro had gone.

Carmen stood up to clean away their plates. When she spoke her voice was bright.

'Why don't I cook for you tonight?' she said. 'Paella, you like that, no?'

'Sure, I love it.'

'It's probably better if I make it at your place. This kitchen, it's impossible to do anything. There's no space.'

She waved her hand in the direction of the kitchen. Her dressing gown fell slightly open. He wanted to reach over and tear it from her. Instead he tried to concentrate on her words.

‘I have to go into the office today, but I should be home by about six. In fact I should get moving, there are some things that I need to pick up from the house on the way.’

He stood up. Carmen stood too and walked with him to the door. Outside in the hallway another door slammed and someone shuffled past, a dark shape beyond the frosted glass.

‘You ought to put a blind up there. People can see you moving about.’

He put his hands beneath her dressing gown, pushed it back until the belt loosened and she stood naked before him. She moved towards him, but he stopped her. He wanted to look at her. He put his hands under her full breasts and caressed them. Carmen moved towards him again and this time he let her. Her breath was hot, her tongue probed and circled his, toying with him. He breathed hard. She raised one leg and hooked it round him, pulling him closer. They were standing in the hallway still. He unzipped his jeans. He couldn’t bear it. He stumbled, slammed her against the wall a little harder than he’d intended, but she didn’t say anything. She was clawing at him, her hands beneath his shirt. She said something in Spanish, raised her legs so that they circled him and she cried out, her nails digging into this flesh as he pushed harder against her, only semi-aware of the pain.

She was waiting for him when he emerged from the bathroom.

‘So, I’ll see you at six then,’ she said.

He kissed her and this time pulled her gown around her. She laughed. He didn’t know what it was she was up to but he would enjoy it, and her objective would become clear in time.

He whistled as he walked down the hallway. He wondered if they’d been heard. He’d never lived in a flat and was surprised by the proximity in which people lived. You couldn’t do anything in such a place without being seen or heard. No doubt Carmen was already an object of some curiosity amongst the tenants. He didn’t like to think about the kind of looks she’d attract from the men, particularly from the kind of men that lived there. He must warn her to bolt her door at night.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Joanna stood on Rachel Arnold's doorstep and rang the bell. She'd poured over Vince Arnold's photographs that afternoon and she had come to return the album like she'd said she would - that and to find out who the man was who'd accompanied Rachel to the exhibition. She was still considering how to broach the subject when the door swung open and she found the same man suddenly standing before her.

'Joanna, isn't it?' he said.

He smiled, but she didn't smile back. He opened the door wider to invite her into Rachel Arnold's house – into her father's house.

'Who are you?' she said.

Rachel Arnold appeared in the hallway before he'd had a chance to answer.

'Joanna, come in. You've met Patrick.'

Patrick was still staring at Joanna, a half-smile on his lips.

'No, I don't believe we were introduced,' she said.

Rachel looked nervous. She ushered Joanna into the living room and Patrick followed. She saw his suit jacket lying on the arm of a chair when she entered the living room. He'd made himself at home it seemed.

'Patrick is Vince's brother. Your uncle.'

Rachel paused for dramatic effect. Joanna simply stared. Patrick stepped forward and offered his hand, which she took mechanically. It was warm and his fingers closed tightly round hers as his eyes searched her face.

'I was at your exhibition. I'd wanted to meet you then, but we decided it wasn't a good time. You were busy, and besides it wouldn't have been a good idea to surprise you like that, not in public. Though I guess it's still a surprise, no matter what the circumstances.'

He still had a hold of her hand. She wondered if she should pull away, but it didn't seem like the right thing to do, so she left it. He wore a crisp white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and she noticed the fine hairs that covered his dark skin.

'Sorry, I mean...I didn't know that Vince had a brother. You never said.'

Joanna looked at Rachel now. And she wondered what the relationship was between them, if they were simply brother and sister-in-law or if it were something more.

'We haven't seen much of Patrick in the last few years. He's been away, haven't you? Doing God-knows-what in the south of Italy.'

Patrick smiled and released Joanna's hand.

'She makes it sound much more attractive than it is. I've been working with a property surveyor out there, but now I'm thinking of returning to Dublin. It depends on...well a few things. Work mostly.'

Rachel gave Patrick a look as if to say that he'd said enough.

Joanna wondered if he had been staying with Rachel since he'd returned from Italy. Why hadn't she seen him at her father's funeral? Maybe she had and had simply forgotten. Though he cut a striking enough figure to be noticed in a crowd.

Suddenly another thought occurred to her.

'Does Vince...do you have any other family?'

'No, there's just the two of us...Vincent and me. And I was an afterthought, the shakings of the bag as they call it. Ten years between us. Some people might say I was a mistake.'

Patrick looked at Rachel and smiled. But she didn't smile back.

Joanna thought of the dates on her father's death notice and calculated that Patrick Arnold was forty-two, the same age as Oliver.

A phone rang and Patrick crossed quickly to the armchair and rummaged in the pocket of his suit jacket. He looked at the screen for a moment before pushing a button and pressing the phone to his ear. 'Pronto,' he said. Rachel shook her head. Patrick mouthed sorry to Joanna and then proceeded chatting to whoever was at the other end in what sounded to Joanna like very proficient Italian.

Rachel sat in the armchair and indicated to the photo album that Joanna had forgotten she was still clutching beneath her arm.

'Did you have a chance to take a look?'

'Oh yes. Here, I said I'd bring it back.'

Joanna held the album out to Rachel.

Beyond the door Patrick was talking loudly on the phone.

'How long has he been away?' Joanna asked.

'What? Oh, five maybe six years. He thinks he's Italian now. He's all "si si" and "per favore." We go to Italian restaurants and he tries to impress us with his Italian except half of them don't know what he's on about because they're from Poland.'

'Is he...is he married?'

Just as she asked the question, the door opened and Patrick reappeared.

Rachel laughed. ‘Did you hear that Patrick? Joanna wants to know if you’re married?’

There was something in Rachel’s laughter that she didn’t like.

‘They don’t allow it in Rome,’ he said. ‘And besides I’m not sure I’d be cut out for it.’

Joanna looked at him, confused.

‘I’m gay,’ he said. ‘Hadn’t Rachel time to tell you?’

Joanna blushed, unsure how to respond.

‘So if you were wondering if there were any cousins, legitimate or otherwise, there’s no chance of that, is there, Patrick?’

Joanna was only too aware of the barb in Rachel’s comment.

Patrick wasn’t smiling now and she got the impression that he wasn’t impressed by Rachel’s attitude towards either of them.

‘Oh, you never know, Rachel. I’m as capable as the next man,’ he said.

Joanna watched Rachel for any change in her expression. Would she read Patrick’s comment as a hint at her barren state? If she had, she showed no sign of it –nor did she comment on the fact that the Arnold men seemed destined not to raise a family. Rachel’s bitterness towards her mother bore more credence now than ever. She must have felt that she had failed Vince Arnold in that respect. Joanna’s existence, such a short distance away, must have seemed a continuous threat during the years of their marriage.

‘So what did you think of the pictures?’

Rachel turned Vince’s photo album in her hands and looked eagerly at Joanna.

‘Very professional...did he train as a photographer?’

‘You know, I’m not sure. He may have done a course...as you know he studied journalism at college.’

Rachel looked at Patrick who took the album from her and flicked through the pages. There were shots of horses, coats sleek with sweat or grooming – according to which end of the race they were at. When she’d looked through the album the night before Joanna had thought how easy it must have been for her father to become involved in gambling. There would have been tips, maybe he’d won money at the start, but the stakes and temptation had just got higher.

‘Ah, Vince was always messing around with cameras,’ Patrick said. ‘When we were kids he was always taking pictures. I remember when he got his first Polaroid

camera. We couldn't believe we could take instant pictures. He must still have those somewhere. I'll show you if we can find them.'

Patrick smiled at Joanna. Rachel took the album from him and closed it, her lips tightened in what Joanna thought disapproval.

'We don't have many old photos,' she said. 'I think a lot of them got lost in the move.'

'Oh, I'm sure there must still be a few somewhere,' Patrick said.

He winked at Joanna and she felt herself warm towards her father's brother. She wondered if she'd have felt the same about her father and felt a pang of regret that she'd not had the chance to find out.

The conversation seemed to run dry after that and Joanna excused herself on the pretence that she had to collect her mother from a friend's. She noticed Rachel's failure to offer her regards. Patrick Arnold picked up his jacket when she said that she was leaving, and claimed that he, too, had better get going. He had a meeting to discuss a job.

They left the house together. Joanna was aware of Rachel standing in the door watching them as they walked down the garden path. She continued to stand there as Joanna got into her car, and Patrick leaned against the frame talking.

'Sarcastic, isn't she?' he said. He laughed. 'She hasn't quite got her head around my proclivity.'

'I thought it was me that brought out the worst in her. I mean...I can understand it in a way. It must be difficult. I'm a constant reminder of Vince's affair with my mother.'

'Don't underestimate her,' he said. 'Rachel's well able to take care of herself. They're well matched, she and my brother. Always have been.'

Joanna didn't correct his use of the present tense. She assumed that he, too, had yet to get used to Vince's passing.

Rachel had closed the door and gone back inside. Joanna glanced at the window and imagined her standing inside the curtain looking out. The light was off, a sure sign that they were being spied on.

'It would be nice to have a chat some time,' Patrick said. 'Maybe I could take you out for dinner?'

'If she hadn't known he was gay, she might have thought he was hitting on her - blood relation or not. Her assumption that he and Rachel Arnold had been involved

had been totally off the mark, and she concluded that Patrick Arnold was just a nice guy who wanted to get to know her.

‘I’d like that,’ she said.

She gave Patrick her number, thinking that maybe her newfound uncle could enlighten her about her father in a way that her mother and Rachel couldn’t. He’d grown up with him. He would know Vince better than anyone, and maybe he could paint a clearer picture of the man whose blood ran through her veins.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The meeting with his client didn't take long. The case was going to court the next day and he wanted to make sure that they had thought of everything. His client would have no difficulty keeping custody of her children. The father had a history of violence against both her and the children, and he had served time in prison for assaulting a man outside a bar the previous year. Oliver looked forward to seeing him squirm in the courtroom.

When his client had left, assured that she had little to worry about, Oliver locked his files away and checked his briefcase to ensure that he had the chequebook for his and Mercedes's joint account. He had looked at it that morning and there were two cheques remaining that bore Mercedes's signature. He would write a cheque for twelve thousand euro and give it to Carmen. He still wondered what had inspired her to ask for the money. It was a risk. How did she know that Mercedes would not contact him for that exact reason? Either she needed it badly or she didn't care what Mercedes thought anymore. He hoped that it was the latter, it might stop her from looking for her sister, and on a whim he went into a supermarket and bought chocolates for Carmen as well as an expensive bottle of wine.

It was after seven o' clock when Carmen arrived weighed down with bags.

'I had to go to two different supermarkets to find what I needed,' she told him.

She went straight to the kitchen and emptied the food out on the counter. He had a fleeting image of Mercedes doing the same thing and tried to erase it from his mind.

'I guess you know where to find everything?' Oliver said.

Carmen shook her head. 'You can show me. You know how to make Paella, no?'

'Me? No, I'm not much of a cook actually.'

Carmen raised an eyebrow.

'Five years living with a Spanish girl and you don't know how to make Paella? Today, you will learn. You can be my assistant, and next time you can make it for me.'

'Won't I be in the way?'

'Uh-uh.'

Carmen had been taking out cutting boards and knives as they talked. She spread the ingredients on the counter top, unwrapped three breasts of chicken and began to cut one into thin slices.

Oliver spread his hands and laughed. 'So, what do I do?'

‘First you cut the chicken like this.’

She indicated the slices that she’d already done and gave him the knife.

He began to cut. ‘Okay?’ he said.

‘Perfect.’

Carmen had taken a sharp knife and began to busy herself chopping tomatoes.

He watched as she cut. Her hands were small. A gold bracelet glinted on her right wrist and he wondered if it were a gift from a man. He didn’t doubt that she had her admirers. She caught him looking at her and smiled.

‘Okay. Now take a pan and heat some oil. When it’s hot, you put in the chicken and begin to fry.’

He had to admit he was enjoying himself. Mercedes had always cooked for him, but she had never asked him to help. When he’d gone into the kitchen when she was cooking, she’d chased him out and he’d gone willingly. Carmen seemed at home in the kitchen. She was in command and he guessed that was how she liked it. He’d begun to realise that he didn’t know Carmen at all. He wasn’t fooling himself. He knew that she was treacherous and that to get on the wrong side of her was a bad idea, but he figured there were many things that he didn’t know about her. She was volatile and it was because of this that she excited him as no other woman had.

The chicken sizzled in the pan. He stirred it once. Carmen was arranging vegetables on a plate. He put his hands on her waist and kissed her neck. She laughed and pointed her knife at the sizzling pan.

‘The chicken, it will burn,’ she said.

‘Let it.’

Oliver lifted her skirt and caressed her silky skin. She groaned and pushed his hands away. When he did it again she picked up the knife and pointed it at him, laughing. He wondered for an instant if she’d use it. Something told him that in the right circumstances she might.

They stood like that for a moment, and then Carmen let the knife fall. It clattered on the tiles beneath their feet shattering the spell. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. When he lifted her, she said something about the food burning, and he reached out blindly to remove the frying pan from the hob before carrying her to the kitchen table.

Carmen curled her legs round him. He took her wrists and pushed her away so that she was lying flat on the table and then he ran his hands along her body. He

unbuttoned her blouse. And with trembling hands he tore at the last few buttons that wouldn't come undone. She was lying on the tabletop as he pushed his way inside her. He heard Carmen gasp and he pushed further still. She attempted to move, to manoeuvre herself into an upright position, but he didn't want her to. He was in control, not her. He thrust harder. Carmen cried out and he wasn't sure if he'd hurt her and he didn't care. In all his years with Mercedes it had never been like that. Sex was contained to the bedroom. It wasn't something spontaneous – something rough. He withdrew almost guiltily when he was done. He glanced at Carmen's face, half afraid of what he might see there, but she was laughing. She was laughing so hard that she couldn't sit upright. He helped her up and kissed her, still guilty about how rough he'd been, but Carmen could take it. She was the antithesis of her sister.

Carmen buttoned up her blouse and finished cooking the Paella. Oliver opened the bottle of wine he'd bought, poured two glasses, sat in his armchair and waited. It occurred to him while he was sipping his wine that he hadn't called Joanna to apologise for failing to turn up at her exhibition. She'd be pretty mad, he figured. His excuse when he called her had better be a good one.

In the kitchen he could hear Carmen singing softly as she cooked. He took his briefcase from where he'd left it on the floor, snapped the locks open and took out his chequebook. He tore out the cheque that he'd made out to Carmen, folded it and put it in his shirt pocket. He would give it to her when they'd eaten. After that, it was up to her what she did with the money. He didn't care.

He looked up as Carmen entered with the food, and for a moment her resemblance to Mercedes froze the smile on his face. What would she think, he wondered, if she knew what he'd done? Would she understand that it had been an accident, that he'd never intended for it to end as it had? He took a large mouthful of wine and swallowed back the wave of panic that threatened to wash over him. What had happened to Mercedes was a dreadful accident, and he had to move on.

Satiated after the meal, Oliver pushed his plate away and poured the last of the wine.

'I have that cheque for you by the way,' he said, reaching into his shirt pocket and taking out the slip of paper.

For a moment Carmen's face darkened, but she took it, looked at it and then put it in her purse.

Oliver swirled the liquid in the end of his glass and held her gaze across the table. He noticed how the wine had blackened her lips like blood.

‘When will you see her?’ he said.

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow? How did you know I’d have the money so fast?’

Carmen shrugged. ‘I didn’t. But now that I’ve got it, I can meet her. I’ll take the train to Belfast in the morning, spend the weekend.’

Oliver nodded and said nothing. He looked at Carmen and wondered if that’s what the evening had been all about. Had she simply been waiting for him to hand over the money?

Carmen stood up and began to clear the table.

‘It’s okay, you can leave that,’ he said.

He took the plates from her, put them back on the table and kissed her.

‘In the morning when you’ve gone it will remind me of what a nice evening we had,’ he said.

He saw Carmen’s face soften. He kissed her again, took her hand and led her towards the stairs. He still hadn’t worked out if her motive was one of love or if it was something more cunning than that. But he knew that he would constantly have to remind himself that Carmen was not an ally – not when it came to her sister and what he had done.

Chapter Forty

‘Mam, did you know that Vince had a younger brother?’

Joanna’s mother was unloading the washing machine and she stopped, her hands continuing automatically to fold a blouse as she answered.

‘I think he might have mentioned him once. He generally didn’t speak about his family. Who told you about him?’

‘Nobody actually, I met him at Rachel’s house.’

Her mother stooped to take more clothes from the machine. Joanna couldn’t see her face, but she heard the disapproval in her tone as she asked the question.

‘What were doing over there?’

‘I went over to return a photo album. Vince’s photo album. Rachel gave it to me last time I saw her. Did you know that he took pictures?’

Her mother nodded. ‘He was always at it. Everywhere we went...’

‘Anyway, Patrick, Vince’s brother, he’s staying with Rachel. They came to the exhibition the other night, but I didn’t know who he was then. I’d even wondered if Rachel had met someone. Have you ever met him?’

Her mother finished folding the wet clothes and left the basket by the back door.

‘Vince wasn’t exactly bringing me around introducing me to his family,’ she said.

‘No, I know that. I just thought maybe...you know with brothers and all.’ She let her sentence trail off. What did she think, that Patrick knew all about his brother’s affair with her mother? He would have been what - fourteen? Too young then to confide in.

Joanna watched as her mother put her coat and gloves on and got ready to go out to the washing line. She followed her out into the icy air.

‘Anyway, he seems nice. He’s invited me for coffee and I thought I might go.’

Her mother took a clothes peg from between her teeth and clamped it on the corner of a sheet as Joanna held the other end.

‘What is it with you and the Arnolds?’ she said. ‘You can’t seem to get enough of them, can you?’

‘It’s not that. I mean Patrick’s not Vince, you can’t blame him for the past.’

‘He’s his brother though, and that’s close enough. Is it any wonder I didn’t tell you about them? You’d have been straight around there and he wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with you. How would you have felt then?’

‘But Patrick’s the one that invited me for coffee. I didn’t ask him.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

There was violence in the way her mother hung the washing, stabbing the pegs onto the edges of the clothes as the line bounced with force.

‘Look I know you’d rather I had nothing to do with them, but you have to see this from my point of view. I want to know where I came from. I’ll never know my father, but at least I can find out something about him.’

Her mother picked up the empty basket and brushed past her into the house.

‘Just don’t go inviting him around here Joanna. I don’t want to meet any of the Arnolds again, is that clear?’

‘I won’t. Don’t worry.’

Joanna’s mobile rang just as they got inside. Her mother looked at her with a raised eyebrow. But it was Oliver’s name that flashed on the screen. Joanna turned the volume down and watched the screen flash until finally it went to voicemail. A few minutes later, it blipped to tell her she had one new message. She sighed. It was two days since she’d heard from Oliver. He hadn’t had the decency to call to explain why he’d not been able to make it to the exhibition and she wasn’t sure now if she wanted to hear his excuse. But she dialled her voicemail and listened.

‘Joanna, hi. It’s Oliver. I’m really sorry I haven’t called. But I got caught up in the office the evening of your exhibition, and to be honest it was just as well that I didn’t go. When I got home I was really sick...I hadn’t been feeling good all day. The doctor said it was food poisoning. Anyway, you must be really annoyed and I wouldn’t blame you. I’ll try you again in a while...or if you get the message maybe you’d call me.’

Joanna hung up, and then re-played the message. He sounded genuine, although she was sure that food poisoning ranked among the top excuses for people not having made it to events they wanted to avoid. She supposed she’d have to give him the benefit of the doubt. But she wouldn’t call him. He said that he’d call again and she didn’t want to appear too ready to forgive him. He had let her down badly.

An hour passed and she was beginning to regret not having answered his call. It was Friday evening, she hadn’t made any plans and she felt restless. Her mother was acting cool after the words they’d had about the Arnolds and she didn’t fancy sitting in for the night. When the phone rang she counted to three and then answered.

‘Joanna. Hi. Did you get my message?’

She told him she did and asked if he was feeling better.

‘I’m so sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you must have been really angry. I should have at least texted, but I was feeling that bad that I just switched the phone off and stayed in bed. I’m still not one hundred per cent. But look, I was thinking you might like to come over. I’d invite you out, but I don’t really feel up to it. What do you say? We could order pizza or something?’

Joanna paused a beat. ‘Well, okay. Why not? Do you want me to bring anything? You probably haven’t managed to get out to the shops.’

‘No...I think I’m okay for everything. I’ll see you an hour or so?’

‘Sure.’

She fought back the feeling of excitement bubbling in the pit of her stomach. She shouldn’t be so ready to forgive him, for all she knew it could have been one big lie, but she didn’t want it to be. And he wanted to see her; that was the important thing.

She showered and changed and went downstairs. Her mother was watching TV, but she looked up as Joanna entered the room.

‘Was that him? Was that Patrick Arnold?’

Joanna hovered in the doorway.

‘No, it was Oliver.’

Her mother nodded. ‘You’re still seeing him? You hadn’t mentioned him in a while. Is it going okay?’

Joanna sat down. She knew that her mother was trying to put things right between them. She didn’t like to argue any more than Joanna did. Although, she wondered what kind of reaction she might have got had she said yes, that it was Patrick Arnold she was going to meet? She suspected that her mother’s tone would have been something less than conciliatory.

‘It’s going well, I think.’

Her mother looked at her. ‘You don’t sound sure.’

‘Well, he didn’t turn up at the exhibition and I was really annoyed. I didn’t hear from him until now. He said he’s been sick for the last few days.’

Her mother nodded. ‘And you don’t really believe him?’

‘I’d like to.’

‘Well, just be careful that you don’t believe something just because you want to. Don’t worry, I’m not going to lecture you, I know you hate that and besides you’d only do the opposite to what I said anyway. But listen to your gut, not your feelings.’

Joanna smiled. 'I know. I don't want to be too hasty. I mean, he could well have been sick. So this time I'll let him away with it. Don't worry Mam. I'm not as naïve as you think.'

'I don't think you're naïve, you just see the best in people. I was like that, too, before I got old and cynical.'

Joanna laughed. 'You're not either of those things. I know you worry about me, but there's no need. I'd better get going. I probably won't be back tonight, so I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget to lock up.'

Joanna leaned down and hugged her mother. She smelt of cocoa butter, her cheek soft against her own.

Chapter Forty-One

Oliver had changed the bedclothes and made sure that there was nothing that belonged to Carmen lying around the house before he called Joanna. That morning when he'd woken, he thought that Carmen might have backtracked on her plan, but she asked him to take her to the train station. It was Friday and she said that she intended to spend the weekend in Belfast. She would call him on Monday when she returned.

As Oliver sat waiting for Joanna to arrive, he wondered where exactly Carmen had gone. Despite the time he'd spent with her, she continued to surprise and intrigue him. He had watched her ascend the escalator into the station with her bag and he had toyed with the idea of parking the car and following her to see where she'd gone, but then he'd decided against it. Carmen was likely to see him entering the station and he wouldn't be able to explain his presence there. Instead, he'd parked the car along the street where the escalators were in sight. He'd sat there for over half an hour watching for Carmen to appear with her bag, but she failed to do so and finally he'd given up and returned to the house.

He wondered now if Carmen had taken the train to meet someone. The thought evoked in him a feeling of jealousy, which he tried to dismiss, but it continued to nag him and he was glad that Joanna was coming over to distract him. Carmen could play her games, but he wouldn't waste his time puzzling over her motives. She was probably spending the weekend at the flat, but perhaps there, too, she had company. The thoughts continued to whirl round his head until the doorbell rang, and he chided himself for allowing Carmen to dominate his thoughts.

'Hey, I'm so glad you came,' he said.

He stepped back to allow Joanna into the hall, and then quickly closed the door before he kissed her.

'I mean it,' he said.

He wound a handful of her auburn hair round his fist and pulled her closer to kiss her again, trying to dismiss the voice in his head that told him that it was nothing like kissing Carmen Hernandez.

He stood back and looked at her.

'Are you angry? You must have been angry?'

Joanna nodded. 'Seething,' she said. 'But I'm okay now. How are you feeling?'

'Better. Not great, but better. You'll have to gentle with me.'

She laughed.

‘How was the exhibition? Were there many there?’

‘It was crowded. Of course there were a lot of family and friends of the students there. Rachel Arnold came. I’d invited her, but I didn’t really expect her to turn up.’

‘Oh? How are things on that front?’

‘Interesting. I met my father’s brother; I didn’t know he had one. But he’s invited me for coffee. Maybe he can tell me some things about Vince Arnold, you know things that my mother or Rachel wouldn’t tell me.’

‘And how’s your mother with all of this?’

Joanna sighed. ‘Not impressed. She said she didn’t mind if I wanted to see Rachel, to find out about Vince. But she gets annoyed every time she hears I’ve spoken to her. I guess it’s hard.’

Oliver nodded. It was similar to how he felt about Carmen, both incensed and intrigued by her.

‘Do you want to order pizza?’

‘I’m not really hungry. But if you are, we could...’

‘No. No, I haven’t really got my appetite back yet. In truth, I should probably still be in bed...’

He grinned, put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her.

‘In that case I might know just the cure.’

Joanna laughed and pressed against him. He pushed her away, put his hands on her shoulders and marched her towards the stairs. The door to the room that he had shared with Mercedes remained closed. He hadn’t gone in there since he’d moved his things into the other room. It seemed to resonate with her presence. He tried not to think about it every time he passed, but as soon as his feet hit the landing he could sense her. Now, he hurried Joanna along the landing and towards the light in the other room. She laughed and the sound of her laughter kept the ghost away, at the least the ghost in his mind.

Outside a wind had picked up. It rattled the glass and they shivered beneath the covers. Joanna lay with her head on his chest and he could feel his own heart beat as her hands travelled over his body. She was a different kind of lover to Carmen. Her love was about giving and he felt that if he were to come on rough like he’d done with Carmen, it would frighten her away. Carmen had created urgency in him that both excited and frightened him. It was too similar to the way he had felt that night with

Mercedes, appalled and exhilarated by his own strength. Sometimes he wondered if he could take it too far. If he'd lost control once, there was every possibility that it could happen again. Sex was just another form of violence.

Joanna's gentleness was almost taunting. She seemed to need to be the one in control. She lay above him, caressed his body and made him ache. Then she withdrew and started all over again. When it was over it was almost a relief, because he wasn't sure that he could refrain from taking her as he'd taken Carmen. It took all his will to restrain himself until the moment when she'd seemed happy to end it.

He must've fallen asleep almost immediately after because when he woke it was still dark and he could hear Joanna breathing by his side. He lay on his back and wondered what had woken him. He thought that he'd heard something, a noise downstairs, but now it was silent and he told himself that it was nothing and began to fall into a slumber. He jumped when a minute later he heard someone at the handle of the bedroom door. It was eased down gently, and he sat bolt upright trying to think what was to hand to hit the intruder. The curtains were drawn tight blocking out any shred of illumination that might filter from a streetlight. He made a grab at the lamp on the bedside locker, but he knocked it over and felt Joanna move beside him. Next he heard a voice.

'It's only me. I didn't mean to scare you.'

Carmen Hernandez was standing feet away in the dark.

She hadn't yet seen Joanna who had frozen in the bed beside him. He felt Joanna's hand on his arm and he guessed that she was silently asking him what she should do next.

'Carmen? Jesus, what are you doing creeping around in the dark.'

He had pushed Joanna's hand away, hoping that she would take it as a signal to ease herself from the bed and make some attempt to hide. It hadn't occurred to him that he had used Carmen's name and that now Joanna would not mistake her for Mercedes as she might have done if he'd said nothing.

Joanna was still beside him, but sitting upright with the covers pulled round her when Carmen switched on the ceiling light and exposed them all. Carmen's look of shock quickly turned to rage.

'I should have known...' she said.

Oliver jumped out of bed before she could make a lunge at him. Joanna had jumped up, too, and was shouting at Carmen demanding to know what right she had go barging into people's houses in the middle of the night. Carmen sneered at her.

'Is this what you replace me with when I'm out of sight,' she said.

She spat at Joanna who moved back looking scared.

'I should have known you'd do this. You made a fool of Mercedes, but you'll never do it to me. I know you, Oliver. I know what you're capable of. Maybe now you'll tell me what you've done to my sister. Maybe you'll tell her, too, because soon everyone's going to find out.'

Carmen had moved closer to Oliver.

'Don't be stupid, Carmen. You've seen Mercedes. You told me yourself, you met her in Belfast. That's where you're supposed to be now. Did you say that just so you could come back and spy on me?'

Joanna was putting her clothes on as quickly as she could. Carmen turned to her.

'Don't believe a word he tells you. You mean nothing, just like the rest. Ask him where he's been all week. I bet you haven't seen him, have you?'

'He was sick, he...'

Carmen bellowed with laughter.

'Wrong. He was with me. Tell her.'

Joanna looked at Oliver. He could see the look of hurt on her face and in that moment he decided that he couldn't let her believe anything that Carmen said.

'Is this true?' she said.

'Of course not, she's crazy. She's my wife's crazy sister. I think it's time you left, Carmen before I call the police.'

'Oh, you'll be talking to the police all right. And you're going to tell them what you've done to my sister. I'll never forgive you for this. Never.'

Carmen stepped closer to Oliver. She swung at him and her fist connected with his jaw. He stumbled backwards at the unexpected blow. She attempted to hit him a second time, but he caught her by the wrists and she kicked and screamed at him. He twisted one of Carmen's arms behind her back, and she shouted out with pain. He'd forgotten that Joanna was in the room until he heard her voice.

'Stop it for God's sake. Just stop.'

He loosened his grip on Carmen and she squirmed away from him.

Joanna stood there, shaking.

‘Get out of here,’ Oliver said.

He attempted to put his hand on Carmen’s shoulder to usher her from the room.

‘Get your hands off me,’ she said.

She walked down the stairs in front of him.

‘How did you get in here anyway?’

Carmen took a set of keys from her pocket and threw them at him. He ducked and they landed with a crash on the stairs.

‘I took them back last week, but I guess I won’t be needing them now, no?’

‘You didn’t really think you meant anything to me, did you? What we had - that was just sex, Carmen. I’d never get involved with someone like you.’

‘And you think I’d want to be involved with someone like you? You must be crazy.’

Carmen picked her coat up from where she’d left it on the banister. She made her way towards the front door without stopping to put it on. For a moment she paused with her hand on the lock, and then she turned towards him.

‘You’ll regret this, Oliver,’ she said.

She spat the words like venom and then she was gone, leaving him staring at the closed door. Immediately he crossed to the door and bolted it. There would be no more surprise visits tonight. He put his hands to his head. His mind was racing. Would Carmen call the police before the morning? He wouldn’t put it past her. She was mad enough to do anything. He had to be ready. He had to get the story straight in his head before they started asking questions. He heard a noise and looked up. Joanna was standing halfway down the stairs staring at him over the banister.

‘I’m sorry...sorry you had to witness that,’ he faltered.

‘Is it true what she said, that you were involved with her?’

Oliver nodded.

‘Yes, but not now, it was before. Please, just come in and sit down. I want to tell you everything. I guess I’d hoped I wouldn’t have to.’

Joanna hesitated, and then sat down.

‘Okay, tell me.’

She stared straight at him, and he spoke slowly trying to formulate the thoughts in his mind as the words came out. He wondered how forgiving she would be if he told her the partial truth, and since she had agreed to listen he decided that he would take that chance.

‘Before Mercedes left, our relationship hadn’t been the same. I don’t want you to think I’m using that as an excuse, I just want you to know how things were. The physical side of our relationship had become non-existent. We were like two strangers living in the same house. There was no warmth between us, and yet Mercedes didn’t want to acknowledge that. Every time I tried to bring it up she just got angry, and every time I attempted to get close to her she pulled away. I guess what I’m saying is it would have ended sooner or later regardless of Carmen.’

Joanna was listening silently. She had her eyes averted to the floor, and he took a breath and carried on.

‘Carmen had been staying with us for a couple of weeks. She and I did and didn’t get on. Mercedes had told me to be nice to her, and I was trying. From the moment I’d met Carmen, she’d made it clear that she was interested. She was blatant about it, had tried it on a few times when Mercedes wasn’t around. I’d mentioned it to Mercedes before and she’d laughed and said that was just how Carmen was and that she didn’t have any real intention, but I knew otherwise. Anyway, usually it annoyed me when Carmen acted like that, but things were the way they were between Mercedes and me, and I have to admit that I started to enjoy Carmen’s attention, encouraged it even.’

Joanna shifted in her chair, but said nothing.

‘Mercedes had to go to a conference for work. Carmen and I both knew this and things had already gone further than they should in the odd moment when Mercedes was out of the room. It was exciting...I mean Mercedes would go upstairs and Carmen would...’

Joanna put up a hand to stop him.

‘I don’t want to know about that,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. Anyway, you can imagine. Carmen didn’t care about anything, and Mercedes and I hadn’t been physical for months. I didn’t even feel like I was cheating on her. Anyway, Mercedes went away for the night and Carmen and I finally slept together. When she came back, we acted as though nothing had happened and I thought that that was an end to it. I didn’t want to pursue anything with Carmen. It wasn’t like that, it was just sex.’

‘And Mercedes found out?’

Oliver nodded.

‘It wasn’t until a few weeks later. Carmen had gone home. I thought it had been forgotten, that Carmen had got her way and now she wasn’t interested, but I was wrong. She told her everything.’

‘What did she say?’

Oliver stood up and paced the floor.

‘She went crazy, started attacking me. She said she never wanted to see me again, that she couldn’t believe I’d betrayed her like that, and with Carmen of all people...She took her things and left.’

He sat down again, leaning forward in the chair trying to gauge Joanna’s reaction.

‘And that’s it, that’s what happened. I’m sure you feel the same about me now as Mercedes did.’

Joanna was silent for a moment before she spoke.

‘And Carmen, did you and she continue to...’

‘You must be joking. I didn’t want anything to do with Carmen. You’ve seen what she’s like. I couldn’t understand why she’d told Mercedes...she knew that it didn’t mean anything. It was her twisted way of trying to get one up on everyone.’

He wanted Joanna to say something. He knew that she was trying to absorb all that he’d said and he hoped that she would understand at least some of it.

‘Look I just want you to know, I’d never done anything like that before. I’d never cheated on Mercedes. If things hadn’t been the way they’d been at that particular time, I don’t think any of it would have happened.’

Joanna looked at him, but he couldn’t read her expression. She stood up.

‘I have to go. I can’t think...’

Oliver nodded.

‘I’ve told you everything. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want you to have the wrong opinion of me. I hope you’ll consider it, the ways things were. I know I was weak, stupid, but Mercedes had her hand in it, too. I mean things were over. We just didn’t want to face that, not after four years of marriage. To be honest if it hadn’t been Carmen, it would have been someone else.’

Joanna was putting her coat on.

‘Is it okay if I call you in a few days?’ he said.

Joanna shook her head.

‘I’d rather you didn’t. I need time to think about everything.’

‘I’ll wait to hear from you then, if you decide to call.’

He walked with her to the door. They stood awkwardly and he put a hand on her arm, but she didn't respond. She said goodbye, and he stood at the door and watched her disappear down the driveway to where her car was parked outside. He wondered as he watched her drive away if he'd see her again. Carmen had managed for a second time to ruin everything. Maybe he could salvage what he had with Joanna. It was Carmen's reprisal that concerned him, and he dreaded what the morning would bring.

Chapter Forty-Two

As soon as she'd driven out of sight of the house, Joanna pulled the car in to the side of the road. The canal shone slick beneath the garish glow of the streetlamps. She lowered the window to feel the sting of the cold night air and breathed in deeply. Oliver said that he would tell her everything and she wondered if he had. He had been frank in his description of his relationship with Mercedes, but then why wouldn't he? The fact that the relationship had perished long before was exactly what she wanted to hear.

Carmen Hernandez was a different story. If she hadn't made her dramatic entrance, Joanna would never have known she existed. And in turn she wouldn't have found out why Oliver's marriage had ended. She thought about his betrayal of Mercedes, and she wondered if it was true when he said that Carmen had tempted him at a time when his resistance was low, or whether he'd have succumbed anyway despite the fragility of his marriage.

She closed the window, took her gloves from her bag and zipped it up before stepping from the car. The sound of music and voices drifted on the icy air. The sounds were coming from the barge further up the canal. Someone had probably hired it for a party. Maybe she shouldn't have been so quick to accept Oliver's invite that evening. She wouldn't have found out about Carmen Hernandez, and in a way she wished she hadn't, but she knew that ignorance did not solve anything.

Joanna began to walk in the opposite direction of the music. She kept thinking of the moment when Carmen had walked into the room and of how shocked she'd looked. There were several things, apart from the obvious that bothered her about Carmen's intrusion. The first was Carmen herself. Did she bear such a remarkable likeness to her sister that she couldn't tell them apart, or was it Carmen and not Mercedes that she had seen that day in Grafton Street? Could it have been Carmen that she'd heard arguing with Oliver the night that she'd listened at the front door? And if it was, had she ever seen Mercedes? Did she in fact know that Mercedes was alive?

She thought of the way that Oliver had grabbed Carmen's arm, twisting it behind her back so that she couldn't move with pain. It was like a badly choreographed tango where neither partner knew which step to take next, and, so they'd stood frozen, each one unwilling to concede. She, the forgotten spectator, had watched until she

couldn't bear to watch any longer, and it was the thought of what might have happened if she hadn't been there to intervene that bothered her most.

Oliver said that Mercedes had attacked him when she'd found out about his betrayal with Carmen. What had he done to defend himself? Had he taken hold of her wrists as he'd done with Carmen or had he simply allowed her to beat him until she'd become too exhausted to continue? There was no one there to stop it, no one there to see what had happened between them. Had Mercedes simply packed her bag and left without returning? What if she'd never left at all?

Joanna walked onto the lock. She stopped at the mid-point and looked into the canal. There were swans beneath the bridge, their white plumage stark against the ebony water. Vince Arnold had died in the murky depths of that canal. She wondered what had passed through his mind as he went beneath the surface for the last time. If he'd had regrets, or if he was happy to go to his death knowing the things he'd done.

Joanna took a coin from her pocket, raised her arm and threw it into the water. She heard it hit the surface with a plop and imagined it sinking slowly to the bottom of the canal. The swans remained oblivious to the disturbance. She remembered going to a park with her mother when she was a child. There had been a big fountain in the park and in its white plastic base there were hundreds and hundreds of coins. Her mother had opened her purse and given her a coin to throw in, telling her that she must make a wish. She wished now that Oliver was telling the truth. She wished that Mercedes would turn up to dispel the suspicions that Carmen Hernandez had stirred up in her mind.

Joanna turned away from the water and walked back the way that she had come. A taxi passed her, its lights off. She checked her watch and found that it was almost 3a.m. She wondered where Carmen Hernandez had gone when she'd left Oliver's house. Had she hailed a taxi and gone to the nearest Garda station as she'd threatened? Perhaps they were questioning him now. What would he tell them? How would he prove that he had not done anything to harm his wife? He said that Carmen had seen her. She wondered if this were true. She still wondered whether she had seen her, or whether it had been Carmen all along. She searched her mind for something that would tell her that the woman she'd seen going into the Westbury Hotel was Mercedes, and not Carmen Hernandez. And then she had an idea. She would phone the hotel and ask to speak to Mercedes. Perhaps Mercedes, or Carmen,

whichever of them it had been, was still staying there and it could put an end to the doubt in her mind.

When she reached the car, she got in and locked the doors. Then she took out her phone, dialled directory enquiries and asked for the number of the Westbury Hotel. The operator asked if she wanted to be connected and she hesitated before answering yes. The phone rang and rang. She imagined the night receptionist having abandoned her post on a quest for a mug of coffee that would see her through the remainder of the night. Finally, the incessant ringing gave way to a high nasally voice.

‘Good evening, Westbury Hotel, Gillian speaking, how may I help you?’

The last syllable was drawn out, and Joanna wondered how many times a day this woman had to utter that same greeting, which she spouted like an automaton each time the telephone rang.

‘Hello, I wonder could you connect me to the room of Mercedes Hernandez, please?’

‘Just a moment, Madam.’

There was a pause on the line and suddenly she was listening to an instrumental version of The Green Fields of France. She imagined the receptionist reading the latest instant message that popped up on her Facebook page as she typed the name Hernandez on her ultra-modern computer based switchboard.

‘I’m sorry, Madam. I’m afraid we don’t have any guests of that name staying at the hotel at the moment.’

‘The booking may be under the name Carmen Hernandez.’

She heard the keys clicking on the console.

‘No, I’m afraid there’s no booking for Carmen Hernandez either, Madam.’

Joanna sighed and thanked the woman for her help. Mercedes, or Carmen, whichever of them it was had checked out. Carmen Hernandez was still in town. She wondered where she was staying, and tried to convince herself that Carmen’s continued presence was evidence that the woman who had stayed in the Westbury Hotel had in fact been Mercedes.

Chapter Forty-Three

They arrived at lunchtime; the two uniformed Gardai that Oliver had met at the canal bank the morning he had found Vince Arnold's body.

'Mr. Molloy?' the older man asked as soon as Oliver had opened the door.

'Yes?'

'I wonder if we might come in.'

'Yes, in fact I've been expecting you.'

He opened the door wider and stepped back to allow the two men to enter. They waited in the hallway until he invited them to follow him into the living room. He saw them take a quick glance around. Sweeney's shrewd eyes rested momentarily on the framed photo of Mercedes, which he'd replaced on the mantelpiece the night before.

'You know why we've come then?'

'I presume you've had a visit from my sister-in-law, Carmen Hernandez?'

Sweeney nodded in affirmation.

'How long has your wife been missing, Mr. Molloy?'

Oliver shrugged.

'As far as I was concerned Mercedes wasn't missing. In fact Carmen told me that she was going to Belfast to meet Mercedes this weekend. I don't understand why she's suddenly reported my wife as missing.'

'When was the last time you saw your wife?'

Oliver tried to remember what he'd told Joanna. He wondered if she'd realised by now that the woman she'd heard at the house that night was Carmen. He decided he'd take his chance and hope that Joanna would back him up if he needed her to.

'I saw Mercedes about three weeks ago. She came by to pick up some of her things.'

'You and your wife are living apart then?'

'Yes.'

'When did that happen?'

'About two months ago.'

The younger Garda was taking notes while Sweeney asked the questions.

'And what were the circumstances of separation?'

Oliver sighed.

‘Mercedes found out that I’d slept with her sister, with Carmen Hernandez. She swore she never wanted to see either of us again. I really don’t understand though why Carmen has reported Mercedes as missing. She went to meet her, I dropped her at the station.’

‘So you and Ms Hernandez have continued this relationship then?’

‘No. There is no relationship. Carmen arrived one night about three weeks ago. She’d been trying to contact Mercedes and couldn’t get through. She wanted to know what had happened...and I told her. She knows that Mercedes wants nothing to do with either of us. I only wish it had never happened.’

‘And before this occurrence, would you say you had a good relationship with your sister-in-law?’

‘No, not exactly. Carmen has always been volatile, unstable. I tried to get on with her for Mercedes’s sake.’

‘And so you slept with her?’ Sweeney raised a thick eyebrow.

Oliver spread his hands. ‘I know how that must look. The truth is Mercedes and I hadn’t been, well...physical for some time. I’m not trying to excuse myself, I know how stupid I was, but well, when a woman like that...it’s hard to say no.’

‘So, you don’t think your wife is missing then?’

Oliver shook his head. ‘Last night I had an altercation with Carmen. She came round here. She’d stolen a set of house keys and she let herself in late last night. I had a friend, a girl here and when she saw her she went crazy. She started accusing me of having done things to Mercedes. As far as I can see it’s the only reason that she’s reported Mercedes missing, to get back at me for last night.’

‘But you say that Carmen told you she was going to Belfast to meet her sister?’

‘That’s right. She said that Mercedes had been in touch with her and that she’d asked her to get money from me, her money from our joint account. I wrote her a cheque and yesterday morning I took her to the station.’

‘And what was that sum of money, Mr. Molloy?’

‘Twelve thousand euro.’

‘Do you have a contact number or an address for your wife?’

‘No. I’ve tried her mobile a number of times, but it’s always turned off.’

‘And you’re not concerned about her whereabouts?’

‘Like I said, Carmen claimed that she’d spoken to her. I hadn’t reason to be concerned.’

‘Well, Ms Hernandez says she hasn’t seen her sister in two months. She said that she came here to look for her, and that you were supposed to help find her.’

‘That’s how it was in the beginning, yes. But then Carmen said that she’d had that phone call, that she’d travelled to Belfast to meet her. Do you think she made that up...that something has happened to Mercedes? But why would she do that?’

Oliver raked a hand through his hair, feigning confusion.

‘We don’t know Mr. Molloy. We’ll have to talk to Ms. Hernandez again and try to verify what you’ve told us. We don’t want anyone wasting police time, but every report of a missing person has to be taken seriously. If we could just verify a few personal details about your wife, date of birth, description, that kind of thing.’

Oliver told them what Mercedes looked like. He pointed out the photo on the mantelpiece and they asked whether it was a recent shot. He said that it had been taken two years ago, but that he could show them a more recent photo if they needed one. They explained that they would need it for the Garda website.

‘Could you tell us what your wife was wearing the last time you saw her?’

‘I’m not sure. Like I said it was a few weeks ago. I think she was wearing a skirt, boots - maybe black leather. It was raining the night she came. She usually wore a leather jacket.’

‘And you said that she came to collect some possessions. Did she leave any documents, her passport for example?’

‘No, I think she’s taken everything like that. She had a file where she kept her documents and it’s gone. I’m sorry; I’m just trying to get my head around the fact that Mercedes might be missing. What will you do now? I mean how will you go about finding her?’

‘We’ll put her details on the website, see if anything turns up. We’ll need to speak to family members, friends who may have seen her recently. Were there any places that she went to regularly, hang-outs or haunts?’

‘Nowhere regular, no. We liked to eat out, go to the cinema. I guess you could say we’d had a fairly quiet social life in the last few years.’

He was aware of the young Garda taking note of everything he said.

‘Was your wife working, Mr. Molloy?’

‘Yes. She’s a translator.’

‘And you’ve tried to contact her at work?’

‘Well, no. She’d taken time off before any of this happened. She was suffering from stress.’

He hadn’t anticipated them asking about work. Now he thought of the phone call that Carmen had made several weeks before impersonating Mercedes. He was sure that it could easily be tracked back to Carmen. She was implicated in Mercedes’s disappearance and she didn’t even know it.

‘Would you say your wife was depressed, Mr. Molloy?’

‘I suppose so, yes. Like I said, things hadn’t been very good between us. She wasn’t herself...she was moody. She didn’t use to be like that.’

‘Was she taking any medication?’

‘No. No, not that I’m aware of.’

‘Okay. Well, we’ll get your wife’s profile up on the website. We’re going to need that photograph, if you’ve got one. Here’s my email address, Mr. Molloy. I’d appreciate if you could get it to me this afternoon. We’ll talk to Carmen Hernandez again and in the meantime if anything turns up, we’ll be in touch.’

The young Garda put his notebook away, rose from his seat and followed the Superintendent. Oliver nodded to him but he didn’t respond.

‘What do I do in the meantime?’ Oliver asked.

‘You could contact Mercedes’s friends; see if anyone’s heard from her. We’ll be doing that anyway, but it might be better coming from you, less alarming.’

Oliver nodded. He watched the two men get into the Garda patrol car and drive away.

In his mind he went over the conversations he’d had with Carmen Hernandez. He wondered whether he ought to risk showing the letter from Belfast to the Guards, but he decided against it. There was every possibility that they would check it for Mercedes’s prints and the only prints they would find on it were his – and Carmen’s.

If Carmen was trying to frame him, she hadn’t thought carefully about it. Yes, she had caused him problems by contacting the police. Wasn’t the husband always the number one suspect these days? There had been too many cases of domestic violence in Ireland in the past couple of years. If the story hit the newspapers, he would be no more than another statistic – a husband who wanted his wife out of the way. Only he didn’t have a motive. Carmen did. She had phoned Mercedes’s job and pretended to be her. She had ordered books in Mercedes’s name. She had slept with her husband. And she had extorted money from him in the pretence of giving it to Mercedes. If he

could prove that Carmen had wanted Mercedes out of the picture, he could get the spotlight off himself. Carmen had been rash in going to the police. Blinded by jealousy, she had failed to see that she was implicated in her sister's disappearance every bit if not more than he was.

Chapter Forty-Four

Joanna was walking down the street when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to find Carmen Hernandez standing close to her.

‘I think we should talk,’ Carmen said.

She was wearing the same wine-coloured leather jacket as the woman whom Joanna had followed in Grafton Street, and in that instant Joanna knew that it was not Mercedes she had seen entering the Westbury Hotel that day, but Carmen.

‘What makes you think I’d want to talk to you?’ Joanna said.

Carmen shrugged. ‘Maybe I can tell you things. We could help each other...’

Joanna studied her for a moment before deciding that Carmen was right. And she had to admit that she was curious about this woman who had betrayed her sister and ended Oliver’s marriage.

They went into a café in South William Street. The tables were close together and Carmen made her way to a table at the back wall where they would have privacy, at least until someone came and claimed the table next to them.

Carmen took her jacket off and laid it on the chair next to her. She was wearing a black polo neck jumper beneath it coupled with black leggings and knee-high boots. She looked svelte like a cat ready to pounce.

‘What did he tell you that night? Did he tell you that I was crazy, deluded? I bet he did, didn’t he?’

Carmen sat back and crossed her legs, her eyes never leaving Joanna’s face.

‘He told me that you’d slept together, and that you’d told Mercedes in an effort to break them up.’

Carmen didn’t laugh or deny it.

‘She’s my sister. I wanted her to know what he was like,’ she said.

‘You didn’t tell her just because you wanted him for yourself then?’

Joanna held Carmen’s gaze, but she didn’t flinch.

‘I wanted him, yes. But I wanted her to know that we’d been together, that he wasn’t right for her.’

‘And have you seen Mercedes since?’ Joanna asked.

‘Since she left him? No. I came here to find her. I thought he was going to help me, but so far...nothing. It’s like she’s vanished entirely.’

‘Oliver seems to think you’ve seen her, that you’ve met her.’

Carmen shook her head.

‘I haven’t heard from or seen my sister since the night I told her. Her mobile is permanently off. He gave me numbers of friends, people she knows, but none of them have seen her in a long time. He said that she didn’t want to talk to either of us again, but that’s not Mercedes. It’s not what she’d do.’

‘How do you know? Have you done something like this before?’

Carmen waved a hand to get the waitress’s attention.

‘We’ve had some arguments, but she always comes round,’ she said.

The waitress came and took their order. When she left, Carmen sat back assessing Joanna.

‘How long have you known Oliver?’ she asked.

Joanna didn’t answer immediately. She didn’t want to launch into the story about Vince Arnold, not with Carmen Hernandez. The only reason she had agreed to talk was to find out the truth about Carmen and Oliver. She needed to know if what was between them had ended or if Oliver had made a fool of her. And if he had lied about that, then it was possible that he had lied, too, about Mercedes.

‘A couple of months ago my father died. It was Oliver who found the body.’

‘What happened?’

‘He drowned. He was trapped beneath the ice...’

She heard Carmen’s intake of breath. ‘I’m sorry.’

Joanna shrugged. She didn’t want Carmen’s sympathy.

‘We came here to talk about Oliver,’ she said.

Carmen nodded. ‘Aren’t we?’

The waitress came with their coffee. Joanna straightened in her chair and cupped her hands round the mug. Carmen had said that she could tell her things, but so far all she had done was ask questions. It was time to turn that around.

‘When you came to the house that night you were shocked,’ she said.

Carmen made a sound in her throat and her eyes hardened.

‘Wouldn’t you be? I’d spent most of the week with him. I stayed away for one night and I found him with you. That was fast. Even for Oliver.’

‘He says you’re lying, that he slept with you once and that was it.’

Carmen sneered. ‘And you believe him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’re a fool. I bet he didn’t tell you about Mercedes, did he? He didn’t tell you about me either, not until he had to. If I hadn’t arrived, you still wouldn’t know.’

The extent to which Carmen's words mirrored her thoughts stung. And Joanna feared that she was telling the truth.

'He told me his wife had left him,' she said.

Carmen chewed at one scarlet-painted nail.

'Yes, but did she? How do I know what's happened to Mercedes? I wanted to report her missing, but he talked me out of it. Well, it's done now. The police will have been around there asking him questions. Maybe he's at the station now. Maybe they've found something.'

'What? You think he harmed her?'

Carmen shook her head. 'I don't know. All I know is my sister hasn't just disappeared. And he's been trying to stop me from looking for her.'

'And what about...he said you'd seen in her...in Belfast?'

'I told him that. You should have seen his face.'

'But, why?'

'To see his reaction. To find out if he knew where she was.'

Joanna thought of Oliver at the police station. She wondered if they'd brought him in, if he was, at that moment, being questioned. She took a deep breath.

'Your sister...you're absolutely sure she hasn't been in touch with him?'

'If she had, I wouldn't be looking for her, would I?'

'What if he didn't want you to know? Maybe it's his way of punishing you.'

Carmen shook her head. 'If Mercedes had contacted him, she'd have contacted me, too.'

'Maybe she doesn't want to...after what you did...'

'She hasn't called home. Nobody's heard from her.'

Joanna leaned forward.

'About two weeks ago, it was a...a Wednesday night, did you get caught in the rain on your way to his place?'

'What? I might have...it's always raining in this city, isn't it?'

Carmen looked impatient.

'I need to know. You see, Oliver told me that Mercedes had called to the house two weeks ago to collect some of her things. I saw her, or at least I thought I saw her, but now I think that maybe it was you.'

Carmen paused, and seemed to think. 'A Wednesday?' she said. 'It might have been. What did you see?'

‘I saw a woman at the fire. She...she was getting undressed. He said it was Mercedes, that she’d got caught in the rain...’

Joanna’s face burned under Carmen’s stare. She hadn’t wanted to admit peeping through Oliver’s window, but she needed to know the truth. She needed to know for sure whether it was Carmen or Mercedes that she had seen that night.

‘Where were you? How did you see?’ Carmen looked confused.

‘I called to the house. The curtain was open. I saw through the window.’

Carmen nodded. ‘And so you saw me?’

‘I don’t know, did I?’

Carmen nodded. Then suddenly she began to laugh. ‘Is that what he said, that I’d got caught in the rain? Well, you saw for yourself...now you know that I was telling the truth. Oliver and me, it wasn’t just one night, Joanna. We’ve been sleeping together ever since I got back.’

Joanna tried to ignore the sickening sensation in her stomach. There was one more question she had to ask.

‘Do you know the Westbury Hotel?’

‘Sure, I was staying there. What? Did you see me there, too? Has he had you following me? Is that what you are...Oliver’s spy?’

Joanna tossed her head. ‘I’m not Oliver’s anything,’ she said. ‘But you have told me few things I needed to know.’

She stood up and put her coat on. Carmen stood, too. At the counter, Joanna paid for their coffees without asking. All she wanted now was to get away from Carmen.

Outside, Carmen put her hand on Joanna’s arm.

‘It’s not my fault. It’s not yours either. It’s just what he’s like. I don’t care anymore. I just want to find my sister.’

Carmen handed her a card. The writing, apart from her name and number, was in Spanish. Joanna wondered what Carmen’s line of business was, but she didn’t ask.

‘If you think of anything...anything that he might have said that you think might help me to find her...’

Joanna nodded, and put the card in her pocket.

‘I don’t think I can help you,’ she said. ‘I’m sure your sister will turn up eventually, although if I were her, I’m not sure I would. The two of you probably deserve one another.’

As she walked away, Joanna was aware of Carmen's eyes on her back. She put her hand in her pocket and her fingers closed round the hard edge of Carmen's card. She was tempted to throw it away, but she didn't. Oliver had lied to her about his relationship with Carmen having ended. She wondered now if Carmen's suspicions about Mercedes's disappearance were founded or if she were simply trying to repay Oliver for her recent humiliation. Carmen acted as though she didn't care, but Joanna remembered how incensed Carmen had been when she had found them together that night.

Chapter Forty-Five

Oliver hadn't heard from Superintendent Sweeney since his visit two days before and he was anxious. He wondered if they'd spoken to Carmen again and what she'd told them. She was capable of saying anything to incriminate him after what he'd done to her. He had toyed with the idea of calling her in an effort to make amends, but he was afraid that it would go against him. If she told the Guards, they might think that he was trying to get her on side, which he was, but it wouldn't do for her to tell them that. So he called Joanna instead.

It had been three days since he'd told her what had happened with Mercedes. He hoped that she'd had time to consider what he'd said and that she'd still be willing to talk. If he could just persuade her to meet him, he knew that he could convince her to give their relationship another chance. He was finished with Carmen Hernandez. He was a fool ever to have got involved with her. He knew that it would end in trouble, so why was it that he couldn't stop thinking about her?

Joanna didn't answer the first time, so he hung up and called again. This time he heard her voice, the hello broken into two syllables punctuated by the crackle of wind on the line.

'Joanna, it's me,' he said.

There was no answer. He could hear the clack of her boots on the pavement and the sound that her breath made in the mouthpiece. She hadn't hung up, that was something.

'Look, I know you said not to ring, but I'd really like to see you. Would you meet me, just to talk?'

'Where are you?'

Her voice was low, hesitant. He could hear traffic in the background.

'At the house.'

'No. Not the house. I'll meet you somewhere else.'

Relief coursed through him. He knew that he could persuade her to listen. He could make her see that Carmen had orchestrated everything from the moment he'd made the mistake of sleeping with her. Joanna would understand. She'd seen Carmen, witnessed how out of control she was.

'Meet me at the Harold's Cross bridge. I'll be there in half an hour,' he said.

Frost shimmered on the pavement. He pulled his scarf tighter round his neck and quickened his step against the cold. He arrived at the bridge before her, and stood

looking into the canal as the traffic roared past. He walked on, turned left after the bridge and onto the bank. The grass had already begun to stiffen and it crunched beneath his feet. He walked briskly. He didn't know where she had been when he called her, but he'd said to meet him in half an hour and he didn't want to idle on the bridge waiting while the cold crept into his feet. He passed a man jogging, his breath coming fast in the icy air, and for some reason it made him think of the mountains and how the frost would lie thick on the freshly turned earth. He shuddered and walked on.

When he had walked as far as the next bridge, he turned back. A stream of cars went by, the glare of their lights hurt his eyes and he imagined Joanna driving towards him in the dark. He still hadn't planned what he would say to her and he hoped that intuition would be his guide.

A red car turned over the bridge, he saw the indicator light flash amber as the car slowed down and pulled over to the kerb. The lights went off, but nobody got out. He quickened his step. When he got closer, he made out Joanna's form in the driver's seat. She was sitting in darkness staring out the windscreen. She must have seen him, but she showed no sign.

A warm blast of air greeted him as he opened the passenger door and climbed in.

'I wasn't sure you'd come,' he said.

He looked at her in the dim glow of the overhead light, but she didn't meet his gaze. Instead, she focussed on the windscreen and what was beyond. He guessed that she was trying to avoid awakening any feelings that she had for him.

'The Guards came round asking questions about Mercedes. They've put up her picture on Pulse,' he said.

'What's that?'

'A Garda website. Every station in the country will have her profile. It's what they do with everyone who's reported missing.'

'And is she?'

'What?'

'Missing. Is Mercedes missing, Oliver?'

He shrugged.

'Carmen seems to think so. At least that's what she's making out.'

'And you don't believe her?'

'No.'

She turned to look at him, questions blazing in her green eyes. He wondered what she'd do if he leaned forward suddenly and kissed her, but he wouldn't do that. Not until he had regained her trust.

'Carmen told me that she'd seen Mercedes. She said that she'd asked her for money, her money from our joint account,' he said.

'Why did Carmen want money?'

'What do you mean?'

'You said she'd asked...'

He shook his head. 'No, Mercedes had asked Carmen to get her money from me. She was supposed to go to Belfast to meet Mercedes and give it to her.'

'Belfast?'

He nodded. He knew what she was thinking. They had gone to Belfast. He could see her trying to configure this information and he kept talking before she had a chance to ask.

'I received a letter,' he said. 'I didn't tell you before. The postmark on the envelope said Belfast. Mercedes wrote and told me that it was over, that she didn't want to hear from me again.'

There was a quiver in her voice when she spoke.

'This letter...did you receive it before we went...?'

He nodded.

'And that's the reason you wanted to go there, to find Mercedes?'

'I'm not sure what I thought. Maybe I wanted to find her to apologise. It was stupid, I know. You were with me. If she had been there, it would have made things worse, but I wasn't thinking straight. I meant what I said; I wanted us to go away together, but the letter...I thought it might be the only chance to find her before she moved on. I know how it must sound, but I was so messed up. I didn't think...'

'How did you think you were going to find her?'

'We'd stayed at the hotel once. I thought she might have gone there, but she didn't. I asked the receptionist.'

He could see that she was struggling to accept what he'd told her and he wondered if he'd made a mistake, driven her farther away, but he knew women and in his experience the further you tried to push them, the more they struggled against the tide.

'I was relieved she wasn't there. I'd begun to realise how stupid I'd been as soon as I'd asked.'

‘And the letter. Did you show it to Carmen?’

‘She didn’t seem surprised. She just read it, folded it and put it back in the envelope. Later that night, she packed a bag and said that she was going to find her sister.’

Joanna was staring at him waiting for him to continue. He noted that her posture had changed. She was turned halfway in her seat to face him. If he moved his hand slightly, it would graze her knee. But he was careful not to.

‘I’ve been thinking about the letter and wondering if Mercedes actually wrote it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well...what if Carmen wrote it? She’s capable.’

‘But why would she do that?’

‘For the money. I gave her twelve thousand euro. And if what Carmen says is true, that money didn’t reach Mercedes.’

‘So you think that Carmen said she’d seen Mercedes just to get money out of you.’

‘That’s what it looks like, doesn’t it? She hasn’t come round to give it back. I’d say it’s long gone.’

‘Why don’t you show the letter to the Guards? If it is from Mercedes, then they’ll know that you’ve nothing to hide. I’m sure they have ways of knowing. Wouldn’t they get in some kind of handwriting expert or something to examine it?’

‘There’s the thing. Carmen didn’t give the letter back and I had so much going on in my head, it didn’t even occur to me that she’d kept it.’

‘Why don’t you call her and ask her what she’s done with the money?’

‘I think it’s better not to contact her. She has a way of twisting things to make them look bad. If I phoned her she might try to say I was trying to convince her to get the Guards to call off the case. All the Guards would have to do is run a trace, and bingo, there’s my number.’

They were silent for a while. Joanna turned the heat down when he unbuttoned his jacket. A stray snowflake drifted and melted on the windscreen.

‘I never wanted you to get caught up in all this. I hoped that Carmen would just accept the fact that her sister had gone, and would return to Spain and leave it alone. I wanted to move on. Now there’s this whole investigation to get through. The waiting to see if the Guards turn up anything on Mercedes’s whereabouts...I dread to think about it.’

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. What he said was true, but not for the reason he intimated.

‘Last week...did you sleep with Carmen?’

The question caught him by surprise.

‘No. Carmen said that just to get you riled. It’s what she does, plays people off one another to get what she wants. She probably thought that with you out of the picture, she and I...well, it’s the same as it was with Mercedes, isn’t it? Carmen told me herself that she was jealous of Mercedes...that she wanted what she had.’

Joanna sighed. ‘That night when I came to the house...the night that I looked through the window...it wasn’t Mercedes. It was Carmen, wasn’t it?’

He shook his head. ‘It was Mercedes. She came to collect some of her things. I told you that already. Joanna, don’t you trust me?’

He turned from her, wounded.

‘I came here to ask you if you thought you could give it another chance, but I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have asked you to come. It was selfish of me. You’re such a nice girl, and it was wrong of me to drag you into this. I’ll just be sorry to see you go, thinking so badly of me.’

He brushed the hair from her face, opened the door and made to leave. He was halfway out the door when she leaned across and said his name.

‘Oliver.’

He stopped and turned.

‘Just give me time. I can’t...I can’t make any promises.’

‘You’re not saying it’s over then?’

‘I don’t know. I want to believe you...I’m not saying I don’t, it’s just...’

He reached into the car and took her hand.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Just for saying that. I know how hard this must be. We’ve known each other such a short time, and I can imagine the doubts you’re having. I’ll give you time, as much time as you need. I just want to sort this out, for it to end. You have no idea how much I regret everything.’

As he said the words he knew them to be true. He wished he’d never slept with Carmen Hernandez. He wished Mercedes hadn’t found out the way that she had. And more than anything, he wished that she wasn’t lying beneath the earth in that shallow grave, put there by his own hand. As he thought it, he felt like weeping.

Chapter Forty-Six

Joanna didn't offer to drive Oliver home. She didn't trust herself to do so. Instead she sat and watched his retreating form as he made his way along the canal, back the way he had come. She hadn't mentioned her meeting with Carmen Hernandez. She was still trying to figure whether Carmen had been telling the truth or not. Was she merely trying to come between them, clearing the way for herself as Oliver had said? She wished she knew.

She waited until Oliver had vanished from view before starting the car and pulling out into the traffic. It was peak hour and she turned off the canal into Rathmines, pursuing the route that took her past Vince Arnold's house, something that she had found herself doing many times in the weeks since Rachel's visit.

The lights were on in Rachel's house. Joanna slowed the car as she approached. Patrick Arnold's hire car was in the garden, but it was not that which drew her attention. It was the auctioneer's "for sale" sign staked in the earth inside the garden wall. She wondered when Rachel had decided to sell up and slowing the car to a halt, she decided to find out.

She stood on the doorstep and waited for Rachel to respond to the noise of the bell, whose chiming she heard echo throughout the hall. She wondered if it would be Rachel or Patrick who came to the door. She stood for some minutes before she pressed the bell again. There was no sound of movement within the house and she was beginning to wonder if there was anybody home, when suddenly light flooded the porch and Rachel stood before her.

'Joanna – this is a surprise. Come in...come in out of the cold.'

Rachel glanced over Joanna's shoulder before ushering her into the warmth of the hall. Once they were inside she turned the porch light off again. Joanna thought she seemed nervous and figured it was because Rachel knew that she was about to question her about the sign in the garden.

'I saw the "for sale" sign. I didn't know you were moving.'

Joanna tried to make the words sound casual, but they came out stilted, a semi-accusation.

Rachel nodded and sat in the armchair.

'I can't stand being here since...there are too many memories,' she said.

'Where will you go?'

‘I’m thinking of leaving Dublin. Patrick’s been looking at property for me in Italy. I could buy a nice villa for a good price and have money left over. Vince and I often talked about retiring to another country; buying a house by the sea. There’s nothing here for me now.’

Joanna nodded, thinking that the last trace of Vince Arnold would be gone when Rachel left. It would be as though he’d never existed. A thought suddenly occurred to her.

‘And Patrick...will he go as well?’

Rachel shrugged.

‘I’m not sure what Patrick’s plans are. I don’t think he know himself, he’s always been...unpredictable.’

Joanna heard a noise upstairs. She looked at Rachel questioningly.

‘He’s upstairs taking a shower.’

‘When do you plan on moving?’ Joanna asked.

‘As soon as he finds a place...it can’t be...’

A loud banging at the knocker on the hall door swallowed Rachel’s words. She stood in fright, her hand flying to her mouth. She put her finger to her lips, and signalled for Joanna to stay quiet.

‘What? What is it?’

Joanna mouthed the words, but Rachel didn’t answer. She stood, stricken, waiting for the next pounding on the knocker. And it came, dutifully, less than a minute later.

Silently, in slippers, Rachel stole across the room, and exited the open door to the hallway. She put her eye close to the spy-hole and then pulled back in fright. She was still standing there when suddenly the letterbox to the left of the door flew open and a man’s voice shouted through the void.

‘Mrs Arnold, open the door.’

Rachel wedged herself as much as she could against the hall door. She was just out of view of the open letterbox, just feet from where the owner of the coarse Dublin accent crouched, his eyes roaming the hallway. It was the voice of a man you knew better than to mess with.

Joanna stood perfectly still near the open living room door. She watched Rachel whose hands were laid against the wood, her face turned towards her, eyes wide.

‘Come on Mrs Arnold, open up. We just want to talk to you.’

The letterbox slammed shut and the man put his finger on the bell and left it there. The bell chimed repeatedly penetrated to the core of the house, but Rachel didn't move to answer.

They stood like that for some slow-moving minutes until eventually they heard the man's hard shoes slapping the cement, moving away from them down the driveway. A car door slammed. Rachel moved then, put her eye to the spy-hole once more, and exhaled the breath she must have been holding.

'What's going on?' Joanna whispered.

They both jumped when Patrick spoke from the top of the stairs.

'They're not going to stop until they get what they want, Rachel.'

Rachel looked up, her eyes wild.

'And what's that?' Joanna asked.

Patrick sauntered down the stairs. His hair was wet. He was wearing jeans, a striped shirt and blazer. He was fixing his watch on his left wrist.

'Might as well tell her,' he said.

Rachel gave him a look that seemed to say that he'd said more than enough. She turned to Joanna.

'Let's go inside,' she said. 'Patrick maybe you'd fix some drinks. Would you like a drink, Joanna, a Brandy?'

Joanna shook her head. 'No, no thanks.'

Patrick went to the bureau by the window. He took out a bottle of Brandy and poured a large measure into a glass. He crossed the room and handed it to Rachel whose hands were still shaking. She took a mouthful and began to speak.

'Vince...Vince had a gambling problem.'

Rachel looked up to gauge Joanna's reaction. Joanna sat back and waited for Rachel to tell her what Oliver already had, but she showed no sign that she already knew. Instead, she remained silent and allowed Rachel to speak.

'You're not surprised?'

'I didn't know him.'

Rachel nodded and continued.

'As you know, he was a sports journalist, so he spent a lot of time at race meetings. He has...had an addictive personality, and it wasn't long before he got caught up in the whole gambling thing. These men, he borrowed money, a lot of money, from them...I'm terrified of what they might do...'

Rachel crossed a hand across her forehead and took another mouthful of Brandy.

‘But they know...they know that Vince is dead?’ Joanna said.

‘All the more reason for them to come looking for their money,’ Patrick said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Insurance. They know that I’ll be getting Vince’s life assurance money soon.’

‘Exactly, so all you have to do is pay them.’

Patrick Arnold sat back and crossed his legs. He raised an eyebrow at Joanna who leaned forward in her chair.

‘You are going to pay them?’ Joanna said.

Rachel didn’t look at her. She stood up and crossed the room to the bureau.

‘I don’t see why I should. It’s not my mess, is it?’

‘So you’d rather have these heavies coming round scaring the daylights out of you...come on Rachel. Just tell them they’ll get their money. Make a payment, same as what you were doing when he was here. They don’t care about you, they just care about getting what they’re owed.’

Rachel turned to Patrick.

‘Well, I can’t, can I? They’ll just have to wait.’

Patrick shrugged. ‘I told you that you shouldn’t have allowed the auctioneer to put up that sign...why do you think they’re suddenly so anxious. They reckon you’re going to get that money and run.’

‘I think Patrick’s right. They don’t sound like the type of people to be messed with,’ Joanna said. ‘Why don’t you just talk to them, tell them you’ve no intention of making off with the money. Maybe they’ll back off.’

Rachel raised the glass to her lips.

‘You’re right. I’m just afraid to answer...afraid of what they might do.’

‘So next time, let me talk to them,’ Patrick said.

Rachel nodded.

‘Would you?’ she said.

Patrick put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. It was the first sign of any affection that Joanna had seen him show her, but they were family after all, she thought, and he wouldn’t be staying under her roof if he didn’t like her.

‘Just pay them. Get rid of this debt, and start again. Otherwise, it’ll just hang over you. Over all of us,’ Patrick said.

Rachel touched the hand that he’d laid on her shoulder briefly.

‘You’re right. It just makes me so mad that he landed me in this, that he...’ Rachel stopped and looked at Joanna. ‘I’m sorry Joanna. What must you think of us? I didn’t intend telling you about any of this...’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Joanna said.

‘Anyway, they’ll not be back. Not tonight,’ Patrick said.

He moved away from Rachel’s chair.

‘Joanna, I promised you dinner, didn’t I? How about tomorrow night?’

Joanna stood up. ‘Yes, why not?’ she said.

She saw an anxious look pass over Rachel’s face, but she ignored it.

Patrick clapped his hands together. ‘Great, I’ll pick you up. Is six o’ clock alright?’

Joanna thought of her mother, and her warning not to bring any of the Arnold’s near her house.

‘Just tell me the restaurant, I can meet you there,’ she said. ‘I’ll be in the city anyway.’

Patrick nodded. ‘Okay, you know Toscana – the Italian place in Dame Street?’

‘Sure.’

‘I’ll meet you there at six.’

Joanna smiled. ‘Okay, I look forward to it.’

She looked at Rachel. She wondered if she was peeved at not having been invited, but she was glad that Patrick hadn’t included her in their plans. It would be interesting to meet her father’s brother away from Rachel’s watchful eye. Maybe he would speak more freely about Vince, and she could discover finally what kind of man Vince Arnold was.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Oliver opened the door to find superintendent Sweeney standing on the doorstep with another officer.

‘Mr. Molloy, I’m afraid we need a word,’ he said.

Oliver’s heart quickened. Had they found her? Had they found Mercedes?

‘What is it? Do you have some news of my wife?’ he asked.

Sweeney shook his head.

‘Not yet. May we come in?’

‘Of course.’

He stood back for the second time that week and watched superintendent Sweeney walk past him into the hall.

‘Carmen Hernandez has made a statement saying that you assaulted her in this house on Friday night.’

‘What? That’s ridiculous.’

Sweeney waited for him to continue.

‘I already told you: Carmen effectively broke into this house on Friday night with a set of keys that she’d stolen from me. I had a friend here. Carmen went crazy when she saw her. She attacked me and spat at Joanna. Carmen’s deluded, thinks that there’s something between us and that I’m cheating on her. If anyone’s pressing charges, it should be me. She’s totally out of control.’

‘Will your friend be willing to corroborate this?’

Oliver nodded.

‘I’m sure she will. You can’t believe anything Carmen says. I’m sure she’s made up this whole thing about Mercedes. My wife isn’t missing. What about Belfast, have you asked her about that? Has she told you what she’s done with the twelve thousand euro I gave her?’

He wasn’t sure that bringing up the question of Mercedes was a good idea, but it wasn’t something they were likely to forget. If Carmen could play dirty, so could he. He just hoped that Joanna would be willing to back him up about Carmen.

‘Look, I’m sure we can sort this out down at the station. Maybe you could give your friend a call and ask her to meet us there. Carmen’s already given her version of events.’

‘Is it really necessary to go to the station? Couldn’t Joanna just come here?’

‘Afraid not Mr. Molloy. It’s nothing to worry about, just standard procedure.’

Oliver left Sweeney and his colleague standing in the living room and went into his office. He wondered whether Sweeney ever smiled or if he kept the same deadpan expression on his face when he was off-duty, too. His fingers were trembling as he dialled Joanna's number. Please pick up, he thought. He didn't have to worry, she answered on the second ring.

'Oliver. Hi.'

'Joanna. The Guards are here. They said Carmen's reported me for assaulting her on Friday night. It's ridiculous. I told them what happened, that she was out of control. I have to go down to the station to give a statement, and I need you to come with me to verify what happened...I'm sorry for asking you to do this...but will you? She's capable of saying anything. You've seen how she is.'

'Do the Guards know...about me?'

'I've told them. Yes. I had to tell them what happened.'

Joanna was silent for a moment and he wondered if she was angry with him for involving her.

'Which station is it?'

'Rathmines. They're taking me there now. Will you be there?'

'Of course.'

He smiled with relief.

'I owe you for this, Joanna. Really. You don't know how much this means. Carmen's really got it in for me.'

They insisted on him going in the Garda car. He hoped that the neighbours didn't see him. They would suspect that he was being arrested, and that was the last thing he needed. It was a wonder that they hadn't already started asking questions about Mercedes. But he had been careful to avoid them. He lowered his head, and got into the back of the car, trying not to imagine the curtains twitching in the house next-door.

Joanna was standing in the lobby when they walked into the station. Sweeney and the younger Garda led them to a small room down the corridor. It wasn't exactly an interview room. It seemed less formal. But then he wasn't exactly being charged with murder either. They sat at a square table; he and Joanna on one side; Sweeney and the younger man on the other. Joanna looked nervous. He guessed she'd never had to do anything like this before. He on the other hand was used to such places, and

it was difficult to fathom that it was, actually, he, and not a client that had been summoned here.

‘Okay Mr. Molloy. I’ll ask you to tell us what happened on Friday night last, the 25th. Start at the beginning.’

Sweeney sat back and tapped his pen off the desk, and Oliver found himself going through the events of Friday night for the third time. When he finished speaking there was silence. Sweeney sat back in the chair; his large bulk slumped as he tapped the pen on the edge of the table. Suddenly he sat upright, leaned his elbows on the table and fixed his stare on Joanna.

‘When did you become involved with Mr. Molloy here?’

Joanna faltered, and Oliver wondered for a moment if she were about to deny her involvement with him.

‘We met six weeks ago.’

‘And under what circumstances did that take place?’

Sweeney continued to lean forward on his elbows, his small blue eyes fixed on Joanna.

Joanna lowered her eyes and began to speak.

‘Six weeks ago my father was found dead in the canal. It was Oliver who found him.’

Sweeney sat back again, and nodded knowingly. ‘Yes, Mr Molloy and I met on that occasion. You were out walking, weren’t you Mr Molloy...when you discovered the body...my condolences, by the way, Ms Lacey...’

Joanna nodded and looked embarrassed. Sweeney straightened in his chair.

‘Tell me Mr Molloy, do you make it a habit - getting involved with dead men and missing women?’

‘I’d hardly call it a habit Superintendent. More a case of bad luck.’

‘And was it bad luck that your wife found out about you sleeping with her sister?’

‘No. That was stupidity. Something that I regretted immediately after.’

Oliver looked at Joanna, but she didn’t meet his eye. The superintendent looked at Joanna again and tapped his pen on the table.

‘Ms. Lacey, can you corroborate Mr. Molloy’s account of Friday night’s events?’

Joanna nodded.

‘We were in bed, sleeping, when Carmen Hernandez came into the room. She turned on the light and...well, clearly she was surprised to see me...she just went

crazy. She started shouting at Oliver. I didn't know who she was, and to be honest I was afraid of her...afraid of what she might do. I got out of bed and dressed as quickly as I could. By that time Carmen had lunged at Oliver and punched him in the face. He had to grab her wrists to stop her doing it a second time. I thought...she was out of control.'

'You thought what Ms. Lacey?'

'I shouted at them to stop. I didn't know what might happen.'

'Are you suggesting they might have hurt one another, that Mr. Molloy might have lost control, too?'

Joanna shook her head.

'No. That's not what I meant. It was her, Carmen, who worried me. I didn't know what she might do. I thought she might attack me.'

Sweeney nodded.

'Okay. Well, I don't think you have too much to worry about, Mr. Molloy, at least not on this count. Ms. Hernandez can decide to press charges, but I don't think she will, not with you having a witness and all.'

Oliver nodded. He wondered what Sweeney meant when he said not on this count. He didn't like Sweeney's comment about his involvement with dead men and missing women either. He had a feeling that Sweeney didn't like him, and it was mutual. If there was one thing he couldn't stand it was a smart-ass Guard.

'So, are we free to go now?' he said.

'You were free to go any time, Mr. Molloy. No one was keeping you here. We just needed to hear your version of events, that's all.'

When they left the station, it had already begun to get dark. Joanna didn't say anything as they stepped into the street. The guards had offered to drop Oliver back to the house, but he declined their offer. It had been bad enough having them pick him up there.

'Where are you parked?' he asked Joanna.

'Just down there a bit. I managed to get a space on the roadside.'

She had her hands in her pockets and she shivered in the cold.

'I'm sorry I had to put you through that.'

'That's okay.'

'No, it's not. You believe me now about Carmen, don't you? I wouldn't have anything to do with her.'

Joanna shrugged.

‘I want to believe you,’ she said. ‘I just don’t know if I can.’

He put a hand on her arm and they stopped walking.

‘What can I do to change that?’ he said.

‘I don’t know. I want to believe you...’

Joanna looked past him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘You must hate the fact that you ever met me. I’m the one who found your father... somehow it seems like it’s all my fault.’

‘Don’t be stupid; it’s not your fault. If it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else. I just didn’t expect to get mixed up with someone whose life is as complicated as mine. Right now, we’re a bad combination.’

Oliver put his hand on her arm.

‘That’s why we understand each other,’ he said. ‘The fact that I was the one that found your father... that he was the catalyst between us. I don’t know... I just feel that it must mean something... that we’re connected somehow.’

They had reached Joanna’s car. She pressed the key fob and the indicators flashed.

Joanna went round to the driver’s door and eyed him over the roof of the car.

‘Maybe, I just don’t know... look, get in and I’ll drop you home.’

Oliver nodded and smiled.

‘Thanks,’ he said. As he ducked his head and climbed into the passenger seat beside her, he hoped that he had made some kind of progress.

Chapter Forty-Eight

When Joanna turned up at the restaurant almost ten minutes late, Patrick Arnold had not yet arrived. The waiter showed her to a table by the window, brought two menus, and left her to anxiously watch the door. Another ten minutes later, she was beginning to worry that he might not show up. She checked her phone to make sure that he hadn't texted her. A waitress arrived and asked her if she was waiting for someone, and then finally over the waitress's shoulder, she saw him enter the restaurant.

He did a quick scan of the room, smiled when he located her and made his way to the table. He greeted the waitress in Italian. She smiled and said something that Joanna didn't understand. Whatever he'd said, the waitress appeared enthralled. And Joanna wondered if he knew her, or if he'd said something to flatter her. It made her think about her father and the effect that he'd reportedly had on women, and she wondered again if she could learn what Vince Arnold was really like through his brother.

'Sorry, I'm late. Traffic was terrible.'

Joanna half-stood and Patrick leaned to kiss her on both cheeks.

'I'm so glad you could make it. I'd been meaning to call you all week,' he said.

Joanna smiled and began to relax. Patrick picked up a menu and scanned it, and she did likewise. He asked her what she wanted and when the waitress returned, he ordered for both of them in Italian.

'Would you like wine?' he asked.

'No, actually, I don't drink.'

'Clever girl,' he said, and ordered himself a glass of Prosecco.

Over dinner, Patrick seemed careful to keep the conversation focussed on Joanna. He asked her about her studies and what she hoped to do when she graduated. She wondered how she would go about bringing up the subject of her father without it sounding awkward, and finally she decided that there was no other way than to just do it.

'Were you at the funeral?' she asked. 'I don't remember having seen you.'

Patrick twisted a forkful of linguine against his spoon and shook his head.

'I couldn't make it. There were things that I needed to deal with in Italy before I could leave.'

She wondered what could have been so important to make him miss his brother's funeral, but he didn't offer any information. He took a mouthful of wine and dabbed at his mouth with his napkin.

'You were there?' he said.

Joanna nodded.

'That must have been strange.'

'It was surreal. You probably know this already, but before Rachel came to the house that night, I had no idea who my father was. And suddenly, I was at his funeral. I still don't know why Rachel chose to come...I mean, why didn't she tell me before if she wanted me to know that Vince was my father? She knew where we lived.'

Patrick shrugged.

'Only Rachel knows how she operates. Did you ask her?'

'Not exactly...she said she felt I had a right to know, but if she were that concerned wouldn't she have said something before, despite my mother's wishes? Unless of course it was Vince that didn't want me to know...that didn't want to be bothered by me.'

'It sounds like you've been doing a lot of thinking.'

'Wouldn't you, if you'd discovered your father had been living a few kilometres away and you had no idea?'

He nodded and looked directly at her. His eyes were navy and the brows above them thick and black. She didn't think he bore any resemblance to her father, not in the pictures that she'd seen anyway. There was something magnetic about him, a familiarity that made her draw back when his leg accidentally touched hers, something of which he appeared totally unaware. If he weren't her father's brother, she would have been attracted to him. Not, she reminded herself, that that would have done her any good. Patrick Arnold wasn't interested in women and perhaps it was this lack of predatory motive that in a way drew her to him.

Patrick finished his pasta, wiped his mouth and looked at her.

'Did you know about me...before this happened?' Joanna asked.

He shook his head. 'No, Vince didn't tell me. I can't say I was surprised though...he was always...well, he wasn't exactly faithful.'

'But Rachel knew. You know she offered to buy me, she told my mother when I was born that she'd pay her to give me up?'

She tried to gauge Patrick's reaction to this news, but his expression remained the same.

'This is long past, Joanna. Does it matter so much? There's no point in obsessing over these things. You weren't there. You'll never know what happened. The only thing for you to do is to move on, forget. If you want to know about Vince, maybe I can tell you a few things, but what good will it do? You were happy before you ever heard the name Vince Arnold, weren't you? So, what's changed? You're still the same person, your life's still the same.'

Joanna didn't answer for a moment. He didn't understand. Her life had changed. If Vince Arnold hadn't died, if Rachel had not chosen to come to the house that night, she would never have met Oliver Molloy. She had wondered recently if that might have been a good thing, but she was finding it more and more difficult to deny the way that she felt about him.

'I feel that I don't know who I am anymore. I suppose in coming here I hoped that you could give me some answers. You're right, I know that nothing has changed dramatically, and yet it has, in my head. His blood runs through me. I guess I just want to know exactly what kind of blood that is.'

Patrick shook his head.

'Blood doesn't matter. I don't believe in biological traits. People take after their parents, yes, but that's not biological, that's learned behaviour. If you were born in another environment, you'd adopt the ways, just the same as you do at home. Whatever Vince was or wasn't, it doesn't have any bearing on your life, on who you...'

Patrick was interrupted by the sound of his mobile phone. He searched his coat pocket, looked at the screen and a faint smile crossed his lips before he answered it.

'Rachel. Yes, fine, fine. I'm just here having dinner with Joanna.'

He winked at Joanna and stood up. She could hear Rachel's voice at the other end, but not the words she was saying. Patrick walked to the front door and stepped outside. He had left his jacket and she wondered why he felt it was necessary to leave the table. What was it that he had to say to Rachel that he didn't want her to hear? She could see him through the glass door. He was pacing trying to keep warm.

She thought about his comments. She didn't agree with him. Ever since she'd learned of her father's identity, she'd felt that her life was based on a lie. She'd accepted her mother's explanation when she'd told her that she hadn't known the man

who was her father, it was the lie that she couldn't comprehend; that undermined the life she'd lived until that night.

Patrick had hung up and was making his way back towards the table. He shuddered and commented on the cold. Then he looked at the phone before putting it back in his coat pocket.

'Rachel doesn't like me having dinner with you,' he said.

Joanna raised an eyebrow. 'Why not?'

'She likes to be the one in control of things, of the information you get. She's afraid I might say something I shouldn't.'

'And will you?'

'It's always a possibility, isn't it?'

He smiled and stretched his legs out in front of him.

'You make it sound like there's something I should know.'

'Do I? Oh, don't mind me. I have a flair for the dramatic. And it amuses me, seeing Rachel squirm.'

'Do you fancy a coffee?' he asked.

Joanna looked at her watch. 'No, I'm fine, unless you do?'

He shook his head, caught the waitress's eye and signalled for the bill. Joanna reached for her coat thinking she hadn't got what she expected from their meeting. He had told her nothing about Vince, nothing that would enlighten her on the kind of man he'd been, and she felt that to ask him anything else would seem to add to what he called her obsessing over the past.

When she said goodbye to him outside the restaurant, she didn't know if she'd see him again or if she wanted to. It was like he said; they were strangers. The bond that bound them bore little significance. He had said that Rachel was uncomfortable with his spending time with her, and she wondered if he'd invited her for dinner simply to annoy Rachel, or whether he had genuinely wanted to get to know her. There was something about Patrick's relationship with Rachel that puzzled her. It wasn't sexual, that much had become clear, but there was something and she wondered if it would become apparent with time, or if the Arnolds would merely vanish from her life as suddenly as the "For Sale" sign had gone up in Rachel's garden.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Oliver was walking down Dame Street when he spotted Joanna through a restaurant window. At first he thought she was alone and was fixing to enter when a man who had been talking on his mobile phone outside the restaurant went back in and made his way towards Joanna's table. Joanna looked up as the man approached, and Oliver moved back behind a potted tree outside the window to watch.

They were sitting on either side of the table, their profiles visible. The man looked familiar and Oliver tried to remember where he'd seen him before. When Joanna moved and the man stood up to put on his coat, Oliver drew back from the window and began to walk down the street. When he was more than a hundred metres away, he stopped and pretended to examine the menu in the window of a cafe. Joanna and the man that accompanied her came out of the restaurant and walked in the opposite direction, and it was then that Oliver remembered why the man looked familiar. He was a solicitor who had been involved in a scandal some years before. He'd read about it in the paper. He tried to remember the details. Arnold, the name came back to him now with clarity, had bought property that had already been owned by someone else. He'd allegedly drawn up fake documents to say that he'd owned the land, but the owner had come forward when Arnold attempted to build apartments on it. His licence had been revoked and he hadn't been seen since.

At least he had established the connection between the man and Joanna. Her father's name had been Arnold. He wondered if he were a brother or a son. He didn't know how old Vince Arnold had been. He turned in the opposite direction to which Joanna and Patrick Arnold had gone and he began the walk home in the rain.

Oliver was walking along Patrick Street when he saw the first poster. It was possible that there had been others. He thought about retracing his steps to find out, but then didn't. Instead he rushed on, searching each streetlamp and billboard for pictures of Mercedes. The caption simply read, "missing" and beneath it were two numbers, one that he recognised as Rathmines Garda station and the other, which belonged to Carmen Hernandez. He stood beneath the first picture and scrutinised it before glancing around to see if he were being observed. He wondered who had put up the pictures. Was it something that the Garda did, or had it been Carmen? He thought about ringing to ask her, but it was something that he had been resisting. He wished she hadn't ruined everything by going to the Guards. She always had to act on impulse. Telling Mercedes had been impulsive, if only she'd thought about the

consequences before rushing in. Taking his keys had been presumptuous, foolish even. She had deserved what she'd got. And yet he wished that it hadn't happened.

There were a few more pictures fixed to streetlamps on the main street. He wondered how many people had stopped to see them and if any of them had recognised Mercedes. He hoped that there were none in the neighbourhood. He'd done well until now to keep the neighbours out of it. He didn't need them coming around to the house offering sympathy when their intention was merely to pry. He wondered how he should act if it were to happen. Should he play the injured party and imply that Mercedes had been unfaithful, that he suspected that she'd left to be with someone and that was why he'd been hesitant to report her disappearance? It might just work.

There were no posters outside the city. He walked along by the canal and crossed the bridge that led to Rathmines. As he was turning his key in the door, his mobile began to ring in his pocket. He struggled to get to it, but by the time he'd found it the ringing had stopped. He checked his missed calls and was pleased to see that it was Joanna. She must have phoned him as soon as Patrick Arnold had left her home.

Oliver left his briefcase on the living room floor and went straight to his office. He dialled Joanna's number. When she answered she began to talk straight away.

'Oliver. I've just been in the city and there are posters of Mercedes...maybe you've already seen them?'

'Yes, the Guards put them up yesterday. We're hoping that someone will know something and come forward.'

The lie came to him as she spoke. He wanted her to think that he was doing something to find his wife to eradicate any suspicion that had crept into her mind. He needed her on his side in this.

'Ah, I wasn't sure if you knew. I thought maybe...'

'You thought it was Carmen. No, she didn't have anything to do with this. In fact I haven't heard anything from her, not since that fiasco at the Garda station. Maybe she realised that the Guards didn't believe her. She probably didn't expect you to come forward to support me. And really, I want you to know I appreciated that. Who knows what would have happened if you hadn't. I know from experience that in these types of situations, the law tends to believe the woman.'

'Oliver, do you know Patrick Arnold?'

'Patrick Arnold. The name sounds familiar. Should I?'

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and then she spoke again.

‘He’s my father’s brother. He used to practise as a solicitor. I thought you might know him...’

Oliver paused for thought. He wondered if he should tell her what he knew about Patrick Arnold. And then deciding that she had nothing to gain from her newfound family he decided that he should.

‘Ah, now I remember. At least I hope I’ve got this right. I’ll double check but I’m sure it was him...’

‘Yes?’

‘Look, I probably shouldn’t tell you this over the phone. Can you come over?’

‘What? What is it? Why can’t you tell me?’

‘I can and will, but not like this.’

‘It’s something bad, isn’t it?’

‘Look, it’s nothing bad. Not really. At least nothing that involves you. If you come over, I’ll tell you what I know. And in the meantime I’ll check, just to make sure what I’m telling you is right. I could be mixing him up with someone else.’

‘Okay, I’ll be over in about an hour.’

Oliver hung up. He knew that he’d partly used the Patrick Arnold story to lure Joanna to the house. He could have told her on the phone, but he wasn’t sure how she would take it. This way he would be there to console her if she got upset, and besides her presence would stop him from thinking about Carmen Hernandez and the way that things had been before she’d walked in on them that night.

Chapter Fifty

She knew that there was something about Patrick Arnold, but she couldn't figure what. Now as she grabbed her gloves from the hall table and made her way out the door, her mind filled with fantastical theories about what it was that Oliver might tell her. It wasn't something good. She knew that. Otherwise, he could have told her on the phone. She drove fast along the canal. She was eager to hear what Oliver had to say and she hated to admit it but she was equally keen to see him.

The lights were on in the front room and in the hallway an amber light shone onto the driveway and welcomed her. She sat in the car, pulled down the sun shield and looked in the mirror. She looked good, the fruits of her effort to impress Patrick Arnold. She had a feeling that she was about to be unimpressed with him. She looked at the house again. Oliver's jeep was parked in the driveway. She wondered if he would be successful in his efforts to find Mercedes and to what end? If he found her, would it close a door on the past, put an end to all the questions, or would his fervency open a door to reconciliation?

She took her gloves off, left them on the dashboard and got out of the car. The wind lifted her hair and she brushed it back from her face as she hurried across the road. She rang the bell and heard a door open somewhere inside the house and then Oliver's steps in the hallway.

'Hi, come in.'

He stood back awkwardly as she walked past him into the hall.

'Would you like a cup of tea or something?'

'No, that's okay.'

'You got here quickly.'

Their comments hung in the air, staccato, meaningless. But as she looked at him she felt a warmth that belied the coolness of her façade. It was a struggle to avoid reaching out to touch him.

'So, I did some research before you arrived just to make sure I was right.'

'And were you?'

He nodded.

Joanna sat on the edge of the sofa and Oliver sat next to her.

'Your uncle was involved in a scandal about five years ago. He'd drawn up false documents on a plot of land to say that he was the owner. When he tried to build a block of apartments on it a few years later, the rightful owner, an elderly man, came

forward to say that it was his. There was a legal battle, Arnold represented himself, but the old man won. After that Arnold was investigated. It turned out it wasn't the first time he'd committed fraud. He'd represented a taxi driver that was left partially paralysed in a road accident and he'd kept the bulk of the claim in his own account. I'm sorry to tell you this...but it's better that you know what he's like...'

Oliver rested his hand on her knee. She shook her head, aware of the heat of his hand through her trousers.

'I knew there was something about him. He seemed nice, or maybe that's because I wanted him to be, but there was something about him that I didn't trust.'

'I hope you're not upset.'

Oliver leaned in towards her, searched her face.

'Well, I'm not surprised. I wonder what's going on with him and Rachel. From the moment I met him, I thought there was something odd between them...'

'How do you mean, odd?'

'Well, at first I thought they were together, but they're not. He's gay. But there's something else. There's a bond there, I think, but also a kind of conflict. He said she didn't want him having dinner with me; that she was afraid that he might tell me something he shouldn't. I don't know why he told me that, it's like he's playing some kind of game.'

'So you think he took you out for coffee just to annoy Rachel?'

'Maybe, I'm not sure. I think there's more to it than that. I mean what is it that she doesn't want him to tell me. I get a feeling they're hiding something.'

Oliver's hand was still on her leg. She didn't want to move in case he read it as a sign that she wanted him to take it away. She didn't. She'd have liked to erase that night that Carmen Hernandez had burst in on them; to return to the point where they seemed to be moving forward, before the road had forked; before she began to mistrust him. Oliver moved his thumb to gently caress her knee.

'Maybe you shouldn't mention anything about what I've told you. Meet up with him a few more times and if you can get close to him, he might betray Rachel and tell you whatever it is she's hiding.'

'Do you think they could be up to something...I don't know...illegal maybe, given what you've just told me about him?'

‘It’s possible, but what exactly, do you mean? Something connected to your father? It couldn’t be the will. She’d get everything anyway. What was Arnold doing in Italy?’

‘Something to do with property, but I’m not sure what. I forgot to tell you, Rachel is selling the house. Apparently Patrick’s been looking out for a place for her in Italy. She wants to buy a small villa there.’

‘Ah, maybe there’s something in that given his history with property. It wouldn’t surprise me if he were up to the same kind of land fraud there that he was here. It could be that Rachel’s in on it.’

Joanna nodded.

My father was broke if we can believe Rachel. He’d gambled all his money before he died, so maybe that’s it. Maybe that’s what she doesn’t want me to find out.’

‘Unless...’

Oliver stopped and shook his head.

‘Unless what?’

‘No, it’s nothing. I’ve seen people doing strange things to acquire money when they’ve got none. I’d say Arnold is up to something all right. It’s probably better not to get caught up in any of it.’

His hand was still on her leg. He stopped speaking and simply looked at her. The silence hummed with muted words, palpable, so that it became an effort to focus on the subject of the Arnolds any longer. She returned his stare and he smiled and moved closer.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he said.

Joanna nodded, but didn’t answer.

He leaned towards her and she couldn’t move, she didn’t want to. Her mind ceased to function when he looked at her like that. All she was aware of was the physical pull between them and she wanted to give herself up to it, have one more night with him where she didn’t have to think of the Arnolds or Mercedes or the whole mess that they were in. Decisions were for a time when she could think straight; when she didn’t have his leg pressed against hers; when she couldn’t feel the heat of his hand on her skin, or his silence telling her things that she wanted to believe. There would be another time for words.

Chapter Fifty-One

Oliver and Joanna were having breakfast when the phone rang. Oliver paused, a slice of toast halfway to his lips. He had begun to dread the sound of the phone ringing. He put the toast down, rubbed his hands together to rid them of crumbs and walked slowly to his office.

‘Mr Molloy, we have some news for you. Could you come down to the station?’

Sweeney’s voice was clipped, staccato, and he wasn’t sure if he imagined it but he sounded almost upbeat.

‘Is it about Mercedes?’ he asked.

His mouth had gone suddenly dry. Had Sweeney found something out? Was that what he heard in his voice, a certain smugness, a sense of self-satisfaction?

‘Yes. It’s about your wife.’

Sweeney clearly didn’t believe in giving away information over the phone. Oliver went out to the hall and pulled his coat on. If they suspected him of something, wouldn’t they have called to the house in person? Shouldn’t he be on his way to the station in the back of a patrol car? He tried to tell himself that it was nothing. Maybe there had been a sighting – perhaps someone had seen the posters of Mercedes and had mistaken some other foreign woman for his wife. It happened a lot in missing persons cases. People swore blind to a positive identification only for it to be proven untrue. Families got their hopes up thanks to some careless member of the public and were left even more miserable than before.

That wouldn’t happen in his case. Nobody would see Mercedes in some crowded street. She wouldn’t be caught on CCTV in a big department store. She was gone. Her body had probably already begun to decay. He didn’t like to think of it, but night after night he did. He imagined the turned earth in that copse of trees where the snow didn’t fall. He heard Mercedes’s voice calling to him and he wanted to rise from his bed in the night and make his way through the thick of the trees where he could be with her, but he didn’t dare. He had not been there since Carmen had reported her sister missing to the Guards. He was not about to lead them to her.

In the kitchen Joanna was finishing breakfast and reading his morning paper. She looked up as he entered.

‘That was Sweeney. He wants me to go down to the station. Apparently he has some news about Mercedes.’

‘Do you think they’ve found her?’

‘They didn’t say. They tend to be pretty cagey on the phone, they don’t give away anything.’

‘Well, they did the day that Carmen complained. You don’t think she’s come up with something else, do you?’

He laughed.

‘Who knows with Carmen? Anyway, I’d better get down there and see what’s happening. You can stay as long as you want. I’ll let you know as soon as I have any news.’

‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘No, you stay. I’m sure it’s nothing.’

In the car he sat gripping the wheel. He wondered again if Sweeney had something on him. He thought of that night when he’d rolled Mercedes in a duvet and loaded her into the boot of the car. Her body had still been warm. Had one of the neighbours seen him? Had they become suspicious only when the posters had started to go up around the neighbourhood? He started the engine, took a look in the rear-view mirror and reversed out of the driveway. It was only a five-minute drive to the station and he drove slowly, his body rigid with dread.

When he walked into the station there was no one at the desk. He stood there and tapped his fingers on the counter. In a room in the back he could hear voices. A few minutes later the young Garda that had been with Sweeney the first time they had paid him a visit appeared at the desk. From the blank look on his face he seemed not to remember who he was or why he was there.

‘Superintendent Sweeney called me this morning. He told me that he has some news of my wife.’

The young Garda made some noise that could have been an acknowledgement. That was accompanied by an embarrassed look and then he disappeared into the back room presumably to locate Sweeney.

Oliver looked around the station. There wasn’t even a seat for people waiting, not that he wanted to sit. He felt like pacing, but he didn’t want to appear nervous and so he stood with his hands in his coat pockets where no one would see the tremor that had crept into his fingers. He heard before he saw Sweeney’s bulk emerge from the innards of the station.

‘Mr Molloy, how are you?’

‘I’m not sure. How should I be?’

Sweeney didn't answer. He simply led the way to a small room at the end of the corridor.

'It seems your wife walked into a Garda station in Belfast and identified herself last night.'

Sweeney picked up a remote control and aimed it at a flat-screen television high on the wall opposite. He pressed a button and the screen turned blue. Oliver didn't respond. He waited, his eyes on the screen. It couldn't be true, could it? Her body had still been warm.

Sweeney was no whiz with technology. He fumbled with the buttons and grunted in exasperation when he knocked off the wrong button and the blue screen turned to millions of scrambled pixels. He moved his arm and kept pressing until finally an image of a Garda station, not unlike the one they were now in, appeared on the screen. The camera was directed at the double glass doors. There was a timer in the corner of the screen that read 22.10. The door opened and a woman appeared on the screen. She made her way to the desk. Oliver leaned forward in his chair. Sweeney paused the shot and zoomed in on the woman who claimed to be Mercedes Hernandez. Oliver nodded. He was aware of Sweeney's shrewd eyes assessing his reaction. In the close-up it was still difficult to differentiate. To the untrained eye, it would be almost impossible. She had changed her hair. It made her face look thinner, her mouth less full. Her lips *were* less full. He peered closely at the screen and Sweeney pressed another button and the woman reached the counter, smiled at the young Garda on duty and leaned forward at the desk. She reached into her bag then and pulled out what looked like a passport. She placed it on the desk for the guard to see. The woman on the screen was a modified version of Mercedes Hernandez. She had the same figure, and the same hairstyle, and if he hadn't known that it wasn't possible, she may even have fooled him. He wasn't sure what she had done, and hadn't even begun to fathom why she had done it, but Carmen Hernandez had almost metamorphosed into Mercedes.

'Is that your wife?'

Oliver nodded.

'Beats me why a man would want to cheat on a woman like that.'

Sweeney shook his big head and turned off the television.

'Sometimes we don't know our luck,' Oliver said.

Sweeney ignored him.

‘We’ve tried to get in touch with her sister, but her phone seems to be powered off. Maybe she’s out of the country?’

Oliver shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t know, but I’ll try to get in touch with her. She’ll be relieved, even if the news does come from me. What do I do now?’ he asked.

Sweeney looked at him and shrugged.

‘Nothing. Just wait for her to cool off I guess. Whether she decides to get in touch with you is her decision. Nothing much you can do once a woman’s made up her mind.’

Oliver looked at Sweeney, at his almost wistful expression, and wondered what lay behind the words of advice that he hadn’t asked for.

‘I meant do I have to sign something or...?’

Sweeney shook his head.

‘No. You’ve confirmed that it’s Mrs Molloy. That’s all we needed to close the case.’

Mrs Molloy. Mercedes had never called herself Mrs Molloy. It didn’t suit her. Maybe it had never suited her any better than it would suit Carmen. He wondered what had prompted Sweeney to call her that. An oversight, he supposed. He had given her details as Ms Hernandez. It was the name on her passport, the one that Carmen had obviously taken from among her things. He wondered when she’d had an opportunity to do it, maybe on that first night when he had arrived to find her in the living room. What else had she seen as she’d gone through Mercedes’s documents? What else had she stolen?

Oliver looked at his watch. It was just before midday. He wanted to go round to the flat to talk to Carmen. He thought of Joanna waiting for him back at the house. He ought to call her and tell her that he wouldn’t be back for a long time; that Mercedes had returned. He got into the car, drove out of the car park and veered left for the city. Carmen had ended the search for Mercedes, but why? It had been her idea to go to the Guards, to report Mercedes missing, so what had changed? Had she finally decided that the best thing was to remove Mercedes from the picture? A myriad of thoughts spun round his head as he made his way across the city towards Carmen’s flat.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Joanna sat at Oliver's desk and opened the drawer that was stacked with notebooks and loose papers and, careful not to dislodge anything, she took out a bundle of envelopes and sat back in Oliver's swivel chair. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she opened each envelope and looked inside. Among them were a lot of bills and formal letters. She laid these on his remarkably tidy desk and continued to go through them until one that had an Irish stamp and a Belfast postmark attracted her attention. She withdrew the single white sheet of paper, which someone had crumpled up and then attempted to straighten out again. It was the letter that Oliver had told her about, the one that Mercedes had sent and that he'd said Carmen Hernandez had kept. She wondered why he hadn't shown it to the police. It could have put an end to their questions. He must have known it was there.

Joanna began to read. In a torrent of words Mercedes expressed her fury over what had happened. She said that the pain that he'd caused her in the past didn't begin to compare with this, sleeping with her own sister. She wrote that she could never forgive him; that she never wanted to hear from him again, nor from Carmen. Her hope that they were beyond such childish games had been shattered, she said. Carmen had made her see the fallacy of that delusion. Mercedes didn't understand her sister's malevolence and she was tired of trying.

Joanna read the letter twice, and then returned it to the envelope. She looked at the postmark again and tried to make out the date in faint purple ink. It said the sixth of March. She looked at it closer. That couldn't be right. She spun round in the chair looking for a calendar and found one on the wall behind where she sat. The sixth of March had been a Saturday – the Saturday that she and Oliver had gone to Belfast.

She thought of her conversation, of the disappointment she'd felt when he'd told her that he'd gone to Belfast hoping to find Mercedes, but the letter hadn't been posted before that weekend. She recalled how on their way to the restaurant that afternoon, Oliver had stopped off at a post box to send what he'd said were legal documents. She tried to remember what the envelope had looked like, but she hadn't been paying attention. He'd simply reached into his coat pocket as she'd turned to watch a nearby busker and dropped the envelope into the box.

Joanna's face grew hot. She put the envelope back in the drawer, and then hesitated for a moment before taking it out again. Should she keep it, put it somewhere safe as evidence, but evidence of what? Did she really think that he had

harmed his wife? Maybe he had sent the letter to himself simply to deter Carmen, to stop the Guards from thinking that he'd done something to Mercedes, but he hadn't shown the letter to the Guards. The only person he'd shown it to was Carmen.

Joanna put the other envelopes back in the drawer where she'd found them. She got up from the desk and looked around the room. There were shelves of lever arch files and books about law. She ran her fingers over the spines of the thick volumes and took one down from the shelf. She read the contents page and put it back. On the desk, there were two notebooks. She looked at the letter again and picked up a blue spiral-bound notebook that looked the same size. She leafed through it. There were scribbles, names and dates and other things that she didn't understand; that had no reference. Towards the middle there were fragments of paper caught between the bindings. Pages had been torn out, but the last had left its imprint on the page beneath. She turned on the desk lamp and directed it towards the page. In the white light of the halogen bulb she could see plainly the words that she had read moments before. Oliver had been skilful, but he hadn't had the foresight to conceal his efforts at forgery.

Joanna thought about the day that she had met Carmen Hernandez, of the desperation in Carmen's voice when she'd talked about finding her sister. What would Carmen think if she knew that Oliver had sent that letter to himself? The fact that he'd gone to such an effort as to imitate Mercedes's handwriting revealed the premeditation involved. It was not something he'd done simply on impulse. He would have spent hours getting it right.

Joanna put the letter in her pocket and closed the office door behind her. She looked around the living room. Why had Oliver been summoned to the Garda station? Could they possibly have found something out? Had Carmen come across something to incriminate him? She looked at the clock. He had already been gone half an hour. He would be at the station by now, perhaps in the same small interview room that she had accompanied him to on that previous occasion. She didn't really want to be in the house when he returned, didn't want to have her suspicions confirmed if she asked him about the letter, and she knew she would, it would be too difficult to ignore it.

She took the envelope with the letter from her pocket and zipped it safely in her bag. She hadn't decided what she was going to with it, but she would keep it just in case. She didn't want to delay too long, but she figured she had some time before he

returned. It might be the only chance she got to be in the house alone. Two steps at a time she climbed the stairs. She went into the bedroom, the one that Oliver had shared with Mercedes. The bed was unmade. And she wondered fleetingly whether she had been the last one to sleep in it with him, or if it had been Carmen. She crossed to the window and looked down. The ground was damp where it had been raining. A postman came up the road on his bike, dismounted and propped the bike against the garden wall. He looked through a bundle of letters before disappearing into the garden next door. She waited until he had emerged, and watched him rummage through the bag on the front of his bike, before he remounted it and cycled away.

She turned away from the window. The room was sparse: not the kind of room that she imagined had been furnished by a woman. He had certainly rid it of any trace of Mercedes. She opened the wardrobe. At one end were the few items of women's clothes that she had seen before. She looked through them again, put her face to the flowered pattern on a cotton blouse and inhaled, but there was no scent other than the musty smell of clothes that had been left lying too long in a damp place. She fingered a short silk skirt and had an image of Mercedes – or was it Carmen – she couldn't seem to separate the two. In her mind they were both the epitome of the femme fatale that she revered both in art and photography. In different circumstances she might have asked Carmen Hernandez to model for her.

She started when she heard a car. She rushed to the window and looked down into the street. It was Oliver's neighbour. He slammed the door and vanished into the house. Joanna looked at her watch. There was nothing in this room, at least nothing that she could see that would tell her what had become of Mercedes. She took her bag and hurried down the stairs.

Outside it was raining again. She paused in the doorway and looked round the hall for an umbrella and spotted one hanging from the coat hooks under the stairs. It was red. The red umbrella that she'd followed down Grafton Street the day that she'd pursued Carmen Hernandez. Joanna closed the door behind her and hurried down the driveway to where her car was parked across the street. She hoped that she wouldn't pass Oliver on his way back to the house. She didn't want to see him. Not until she'd had a chance to go over everything in her mind. In her bag, the letter from Belfast was zipped in a pocket next to the card that Carmen Hernandez had given her that

evening at the café. She had told her to call her if she knew something that would help to find her sister. The thought burned in Joanna's mind.

Chapter Fifty-Three

A girl with a stroller was struggling out the door of the apartment block. Oliver hurried to hold the door open for her and then took the opportunity of slipping into the dimly lit hallway without having to alert Carmen to his arrival. As he climbed the stairs to her apartment, he wondered if she were home. Perhaps she had stayed in Belfast.

She must have known that he'd have seen the footage by now. He wondered what kind of reaction she expected. She had no guarantee that he wouldn't tell the police that the woman caught on CCTV was not Mercedes. The thought had occurred to him as he'd sat in the interview room with Sweeney. If he'd told Sweeney there and then that it was Carmen, he could have had her arrested for impersonation, for perverting the course of justice and who knew what other crime. Carmen had put herself in the firing line, but she had done it for him. That was the thought that had been going through his mind since he'd seen the tape. It had curtailed any thought he might have had of trying to fit Carmen up for Mercedes's disappearance, for her murder. He didn't want to think of it as that. It wasn't murder. At most it was manslaughter. Slaughter – he hated that word. He hadn't slaughtered anyone. Slaughter suggested bloodshed and violence, and that was not what it had been. What it had been was an accident, and he had to put it out of his mind.

He paused outside Carmen's door and listened for any sound within. He thought he could hear voices – a radio perhaps, but he wasn't sure. It might have been coming from another flat. He rapped on the door with his fist. The glass rattled under his knuckles and the voices died. He tried again, put his mouth close to the keyhole and called her name.

'It's me,' he added.

The last was redundant. He knew that. She would know his voice, know that he would be round to ask her why she had done what she had, what she hoped to gain from it, though he thought he already knew the answer to that and it made his pulse quicken.

At last he heard a noise, saw a movement beyond the frosted glass, and knew that she was there. The form grew in the glass. He knew it was Carmen, knew from the way she walked, the sway of her body even through the thick glass. Suddenly the door opened and she stood before him. He hadn't been expecting her to look the way she did. She stood back and he stepped into the hallway where they stood facing each

other saying nothing. He felt the nausea that accompanied episodes of panic seize him and he tried to swallow it back. He could see how she had tricked the authorities into thinking she was Mercedes. The likeness was stronger than he had imagined it would be now that she was standing before him.

‘What have you done?’ he said.

Carmen smiled and shrugged. Her smile was not the smile of Mercedes. There were differences still, but only those who had known them intimately would recognise the inconsistencies that made it possible to tell them apart.

Carmen turned and walked into the living room. Oliver followed, watching the sway of her hips and feeling the blood course through him.

‘It’s better this way, no?’

‘For who?’

‘Everyone.’

‘What if Mercedes comes back?’

‘She’s gone. She’s not coming back, Oliver. You know that.’

Her dark eyes looked directly into his and he knew that she knew. And that it didn’t make a difference.

He put a hand to her face, traced the outline of her lips.

‘Why did you do it?’

‘You know why.’

‘Where?’

‘A surgeon I know in Spain. First I went to see my mother. I told her about Mercedes, what I’d done. I said that she’d come back, that you and she would probably work things out. On the way back I used Mercedes’s passport and I knew that it had worked - that I looked just like she.’

‘Carmen...’

‘No. From now on you must call me Mercedes.’

‘I don’t know if I can.’

‘I did it for you. That girl, I know she didn’t mean anything, but you and me. We’re the same, no?’

Oliver thought of Joanna waiting for him back at the house. Carmen was right. Joanna didn’t deserve to be mixed up in all of this. She was a nice girl, too nice for him. He looked at Carmen, and he loved her madness. She would do anything for him, anything to get what she wanted. He knew the danger involved, but he decided

that he was willing to risk it. Carmen had saved him. The only way he was going down was if she decided to do it. In a way she had him under her power, and he respected her for that. If Carmen took him down, he would take her with him. She was complicit in his crime. And he no longer had to feel alone with his guilt.

She didn't ask him what had happened that night. Maybe she didn't want to hear it put into words. It was easier to be with him this way. He would never tell her, he decided. Let her assume what she wanted. A confession would never come from his lips, no matter what the nights brought.

He put his hand beneath Carmen's chin and turned her head from side to side. She had had her lips reduced. The shape of her eyes had been altered. She was more beautiful, not the imperfect version of her sister that she used to be. Carmen had wanted to be Mercedes and now she was. He wondered if it would make a difference to her, or if she'd regret it in time.

Carmen took his hand and drew him nearer. She kissed him and her lips felt the same. Her mouth was hot and tasted of cigarettes. She pressed her treacherous body against his, and he knew why it was that he couldn't get her out of his head. It was her unpredictability, her almost masculine aggression that he loved, that drew him to her. Carmen would never be Mercedes. She was bolder. She was the kind of woman that saw what she wanted and took it.

As she led him to the bedroom, he'd forgotten about Joanna. Mercedes was the name he uttered when they made love. If she were to become Mercedes, they had better start now. In the future there would be no room for mistakes.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Joanna pulled into the side of the road and let down the window. The air was damp with drizzle and it drifted in on the wind. She had stopped beneath a poster of Mercedes zip-tied to a streetlamp. She looked at the mobile number on the poster and then scrolled through the contacts on her phone until she'd reached his name, but the number was not Oliver's. She unzipped her bag and pulled out Carmen Hernandez's card, knowing that what she'd suspected was true. Oliver hadn't been the one responsible for putting up those posters of his wife, Carmen had. It was she who wanted to find her sister. Joanna shivered and put the window up. She sat back and dialled Carmen's number, knowing as she did so that her relationship with Oliver was over.

The number rang out. Carmen didn't have a personal message on her phone. There was a bleep and Joanna hung up. She didn't know quite what it was that she wanted to say. She took out the letter and read it again. Oliver had really thought about what Mercedes would say if she'd written. He had even made a couple of grammatical errors to make it look as though the letter hadn't been composed by a native speaker. It would be impossible to trust such a shrewd thinker. She folded the paper and put it away.

The lights were coming on in the city. They flickered and then steadied to a bluish-white light. Joanna turned towards home. She thought of her mother and how much she must have hated Vince Arnold for not standing by her when she'd got pregnant. At least she wouldn't ever have to hate Oliver like that. She had discovered his lies early enough to have been saved that kind of hurt.

As she drove along the canal she thought of the Arnolds. Patrick had called her earlier that day, but he hadn't left a message. She wondered if what Oliver had told her about him was true. She figured it probably was. Oliver would have nothing to gain by lying about that. Unless it were the other way round and it was Patrick Arnold who might have stories to tell about him. She was considering that possibility when her mobile rang. She glanced at it and saw Oliver's name flash up on the screen. He would have arrived home by now to find her gone, she thought. She let it ring. It was better not to answer now that she had made her decision. She wondered what he had to say, what had unfolded at the Garda station. Maybe they'd arrested him and he was making the one call allowed to him. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and kept on driving.

When the phoned blipped a few minutes later to tell her she had a voice message, she hit the loudspeaker and dialled into her voicemail. Her resolve almost wavered when she heard his voice.

‘Joanna, it’s me. I don’t know if you’re still at the house, but I probably won’t be home for a long while yet. Mercedes has turned up. I’m with her now talking things through. I hate telling you this on the phone...I’ll talk to you in person when I get a chance. Everything’s a bit...well...it was a surprise seeing her...Anyway, I hope you’re okay, and I’ll give you a call when everything settles down.’

She erased the message. So, Mercedes had turned up. She’d been wrong to think that he could have harmed her, but the lies, the signs were pointing that way. She lowered the window to feel the cool night air and breathed deeply. Mercedes had returned. She’d thought she would, at least in the beginning. She’d lived in fear of the moment that it might happen and he might leave her. He hadn’t said it, but his message held the tone of finality that suggested the end. She was glad she’d braced herself for it; that she’d decided that it was over before she heard those words, before she’d heard his voice. And Carmen? Would she be pleased that her sister had finally returned? She guessed it didn’t matter, that Carmen knew that Mercedes would always be the first.

Joanna drove on, past the houses that ran along the canal, and when she’d reached the Rathmines bridge she turned off to drive the longer route home past the house where her father had lived for all those years unknown to her. The house had been sold; she knew that. Rachel had told her on the phone that morning. She had indicated that she would move to Italy as soon as her plans had been executed. Joanna wondered when that might be, and decided that she would stop by the house to see what it was that Patrick had wanted when he called.

There were lights on in most of the houses she passed. She drove slowly and occasionally glanced in a window and saw the flicker of a television, or a man standing by a fire warming his hands. As she approached Rachel Arnold’s house, she saw that there was a car outside. The boot was open and she saw Rachel come out and put what looked like a suitcase in the back. She wasn’t sure why, but she pulled in a hundred yards away from the house and switched off the engine. The car was the hybrid that Patrick had hired. The front door of the house was open and light from the hallway spilled out into the garden and semi-illuminated the drive. Rachel was wearing the camel coloured coat that she’d seen her in the first night that she’d come

to the house. The night that she told them that Vince was dead. Joanna had turned out the headlights. She sat back and watched Rachel lean into the car with her case and then straighten and return to the house. Was she leaving then, without so much as a goodbye? It looked that way. Joanna could have got out of the car. She could have confronted Rachel and asked her why she hadn't told her that she was going, but something stopped her from doing so, and so she sat there in the dark and watched the scene unfold.

Rachel reappeared in the doorway. She held a second case – a smaller one this time. She turned and switched out the hall light. A second figure appeared on the step beside her and Joanna heard the sound of the hall door clicking shut. The two figures hurried towards the car, illuminated now only by a half moon that peaked from beneath a cloud covered sky. The person who accompanied Rachel was a man. Joanna presumed that it was Patrick Arnold, not by sight but logic, but soon she discovered that assumption to be wrong. Patrick would have towered above Rachel. This man was only inches taller than her. Joanna strained her eyes.

As Rachel and the man reached the car she saw them clearly beneath the glow of the streetlight. The driver's door opened and Patrick stepped onto the pavement. He took the cases from Rachel and hurriedly put them in the boot of the car. The other man took a quick look round before helping Rachel in. Joanna watched, frozen, as the Vince Arnold walked round to the other side, opened the door and vanished from sight.

She got out of her car just as Patrick Arnold slammed the driver's door of the hybrid shut. She could have called out, but she faltered. She walked a few steps, and then stopped as the hybrid moved away. She wondered if Patrick had seen her in the rear view mirror as she watched the car moving swiftly into the distance ferrying Vince Arnold into the night.

Slowly Joanna walked back to the car. She sat with her hands on the steering wheel. She could try to follow them. They were probably out of sight now, lost in the traffic, but they were surely bound for the airport and she could catch them there, but curiously she didn't want to. She sat with the engine running and she thought about what Oliver had told her about Patrick Arnold and the false claims that he had made as a solicitor. Rachel had said that Vince was in debt, that there had been nothing left. Had she known from the beginning, had she been in on it? She wondered what her father's life was worth. The price of a house in Italy perhaps – a

simple escape from the debts that he owed and a quiet life with the woman who had stayed with him despite everything.

Why had Rachel come to the house that night? Had it been a final act of revenge on her mother, or was it his idea, his final act of betrayal? He had gone to see her mother knowing that it was the last time that he could do so. He had apologised and cleared his conscience before his supposed death. Maybe his ego had prompted that last call. Her mother had, if not forgiven, tolerated him. Did he expect her to mourn him, too? Joanna wondered where he had been since his death had been announced. She guessed that he had gone out of the country – the thought that he may have been in the house during her visits was enough to make her shiver as though he were an actual ghost. Rachel had been scared that Patrick would reveal the truth. That was what he had insinuated, but Joanna was sure that it had never been his intention. He used it merely to keep Rachel on her guard. Perhaps to guarantee his share of the money.

The house was dark now: the Arnolds gone. Joanna started the car and drove towards home. Patrick had said that blood didn't matter and in that he was right. She had wanted to know who she was – but knowing about her father had done nothing to enlighten her on that. The distance between she and the Arnolds was becoming greater, and it would become greater still as time passed. She could go to the police, report what she had seen and ruin their plans, but she wouldn't, no more than she would tell Mercedes about her brief relationship with Oliver.

As she drove back along the canal, she wondered who the man had been – the man whose body Oliver had discovered trapped beneath the ice. She hoped that he hadn't had a family – a daughter and a wife that might have mourned him. She decided that she would bring flowers to put at his grave – a grave that bore the name of Vince Arnold. It was a name that had meant nothing to her in the past and that she would put from her mind in the future. She wouldn't tell her mother what she had seen. Vince was dead to her now. Finally, she could forget him, as she, in time, would forget Oliver.

THE END

The Evolution of Irish Crime Fiction: Introduction

The following dissertation attempts to explore the evolution of Irish crime fiction from its emergence in Irish literary fiction to its coming-of-age as the best-selling genre on the Irish literary market with many Irish crime writers, such as John Connolly and Declan Hughes, also enjoying international recognition.

Throughout the chapters that follow the question of why Irish crime writing has taken so long to achieve its current popularity is raised. The argument that most writers make in relation to this question is that Ireland was not a suitable landscape for crime fiction in the period prior to the Northern Irish Peace Treaty; that Irish writers found it impossible to write about fictitious murders when north of the border killings and bombings were an everyday occurrence due to the political unrest of the period known as the Troubles.

It may be argued, however, that murder has always been inherent in Irish literature from the gothic novels of Sheridan Le Fanu to JM Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, often cited as the foundation text of twentieth-century Irish drama. According to Professor Ian Campbell Ross, whilst the contribution of early Irish writers to the crime fiction genre is seldom acknowledged "the role of Irish authors in the history of crime writing, more broadly considered, is a significant one."¹ According to Ross, all genre writing produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was by-and-large ignored "as nationalist critics sought to define a more narrowly 'authentic' nationalist tradition of Irish writing" both in the English and Irish languages. (Ross, p.19)

Considered by many to be the precursor to crime writing, the gothic novel is a genre of which Irish writers are said to have been "exceptional exponents." (Ross, p.21) As far back as 1820 Charles Maturin published his best-known novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*; in 1867 Le Fanu published his mystery novels *Uncle Silas* and *The Wyvern Mystery*; and in 1872 *In a Glass Darkly*, the story collection which features the vampire story *Camilla*, which is said to have been a major influence on Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*. Indeed "by the end of the nineteenth century, detective stories were among the most-widely read genre of popular fiction." (Ross, p.22) Oscar Wilde, of course, produced *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* in 1891, and later *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

¹ Ian Campbell Ross, 'Introduction', in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 21. Henceforth Ross.

There were other contemporaries of Wilde writing in the crime genre. Ross cites as examples: LT Meade, Richard Dowling and the better-known M. McDonnell Bodkin, all of Irish origin. However, due to “the lack of a sufficiently large readership to sustain a local popular culture” (Ross, p.21) in Ireland, all of these writers chose to base their detective fiction in Britain where serialised stories in magazines “formed an important part of what English men and women read.” (Ross, p.21) Ireland may be known as the land of writers and scholars, but even today due to the restricted size of the publishing market many contemporary writers, particularly in the crime genre, continue to set their novels in other countries, mostly in the USA.

According to John Connolly crime fiction, which he considers to be urban by nature, was unlikely to flourish in an Irish society that was “primarily rural.”² This, however, seems not to have been the case if we look at twentieth-century Irish drama. *The Playboy of the Western World*, based on a true story of patricide that Synge heard during his stay on the Aran Islands, was the play that “set the template for the twentieth-century Irish playwright.”³ For Sarah Keating:

genre in the theatre tends to be defined more by form – realist, expressionist, absurdist – than by narrative content. So, while the crime narrative in film and fiction certainly has its idiosyncratic structural and stylistic techniques, in theatre the ‘theatrical crime thriller’ does not exist formally as a genre. Instead, it is through plot, theme and tone that the crime narrative finds its expression.” (Keating, p.283)

Rural Ireland is the setting in murderous plays by such renowned playwrights as John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, and Martin McDonagh, the latter whose play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is so evidently influenced thematically by Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*.

As twentieth-century Ireland developed, however, a new set of playwrights emerged who had an interest in depicting urban as opposed to rural life. Writers such as Declan Hughes, now a top Irish crime novelist, Mark O’Rowe and Conor McPherson brought to the stage the influences of American crime fiction and film noir. Hence, “Irish drama found itself re-invigorated by contemporary crime

² John Connolly, ‘No Blacks, No Dogs, No Crime Writers: Ireland and the Mystery Genre’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 45.

³ Sarah Keating, ‘The Murder Capital of Feckin’ Europe: The Crime Narrative in Irish Theatre’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 282. Henceforth Keating.

narratives set in modern Irish cities, which drew on a key influence of mass culture and the cinematic tradition to create a highly stylised, yet realistic representation of the complexity of modern Irish life.” (Keating, p.284) This period of urban crime drama pre-dates Irish crime fiction by a few years; Declan Hughes, who wrote a play about Dashiell Hammet, and “a violent comedy about Dublin gangsters” in the early 1990s refers to this time as a period where he was waiting for the moment to come when “reality [would permit] the kind of fiction [he] wanted to write, namely hard-boiled crime.”⁴

This dissertation sets out to do two things: firstly to explore the evolution of Irish crime fiction from its place in literary novels through to the contemporary Irish crime novel that has become the most popular genre on the Irish literary market today. When I say ‘Irish’ crime fiction, I refer specifically to crime fiction by Irish writers set in Ireland that deal with Irish issues. Secondly, it explores the idea of genre by drawing on the ideas of key anti-genre theorists to support my belief that what is termed Irish crime fiction employs the use of several other genres, rather than merely adhering to the conventions of crime writing.

The first chapter of this dissertation presents the ideas of both pro and anti-genre theorists in an attempt to deconstruct the notion that a text belongs to only one genre. It traces the concept of genre back to its origins in the work of Aristotle and Plato, making reference to the Aristotelian triad, which forms the basis of all genre theory, and to the German Romantic Movement whose theorists are seen to have confused the original ideas of genre and mode. The inadequacy of literary theory is examined in reference to the novel by examining the work of Mikhail Bakhtin who argues that the novel is an unfinished and evolving form, which therefore cannot be defined. Bakhtin also suggests that the contemporaneous nature of the novel makes it the most adequate genre to reflect both the period and society in which it is written. This concept is examined throughout this dissertation in relation to crime fiction.

Chapter Two looks at more contemporary ideas of genre theory, and what it means to be a crime fiction writer. It also introduces the concept of cultural materialism, and how the crime genre reflects the ideologies of a modern society. Examining the work of two of Ireland’s top literary writers, John Banville and Patrick McCabe, this chapter provides close readings of the authors’ work in an attempt to show how each

⁴ Declan Hughes, ‘Irish Hard-boiled Crime: A 51st State of Mind’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 167.

writer employs the use of more than one genre in their work. The novels examined both involve horrific crimes, but are classed as literary fiction as opposed to crime fiction novels.

The third chapter of this dissertation examines the work of two writers, Bernard McClaverty and Brian Moore whose work is set during the period known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Referred to as the precursor to Irish crime fiction, novels set during this troubled period in Irish history deal with all-too-realistic crimes related to politics and religion across the border. The first novel examined in this chapter, *Cal*, by Bernard McClaverty is said to have been the first novel of note set during the Troubles, while Moore's *Lies of Silence* is a pacy thriller by a writer who is said to move with great ease between the literary and crime fiction genres.

The final chapter examines the work of two of Ireland's leading contemporary crime writers, Declan Hughes and Declan Burke, the former's work describes an Ireland in the midst of the Celtic Tiger boom, while the latter depicts the social issues that abound in the bust period that followed the most affluent years that this island has known. Two very different crime fiction novels, Hughes's debut *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, and Burke's *Absolute Zero Cool* reveal just how diverse crime novels may be, thereby showing the degree to which genres have extended.

Overall, in the novels that I have chosen to examine, I hope to provide a comprehensive understanding of Irish crime fiction and how it has evolved over the past two decades to become the best-selling literary genre of the present day. I wish to portray how Irish writers, both those who are considered literary, and their crime-writing counterparts push the boundaries of genre to create a prose that is extremely intelligent, rich and diverse, regardless of its classification – a body of work that transcends genre, and chronicles the times and the society from whence it has emerged.

Chapter One: What is Genre?

At the basis of genre theory is what theorists refer to as the Aristotelian triad. According to Aristotle, literary genres can be divided into three categories: (1) The Epic, (2) The Dramatic, and (3) The Lyric. The triad itself, though it forms the foundation of genre theory, has been the object of various interpretations. Goethe, for example, referred to the elements of the triad, not as genres, but as the ‘natural forms.’ During the Romantic Movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in Germany, theorists including Goethe, Schiller, Schelling and the Schlegel brothers based their theories regarding genre around what French theorist Gerard Genette called Aristotle’s “all-too-seductive” triad. According to Genette, the ideas of genre and modes, whose differentiation are clearly defined in the work of both Plato and Aristotle, are confused by romantic and post-romantic theorists who ‘view the lyrical, the epical, and the dramatic...[not]...simply as modes of enunciation but as real genres...’⁵ Genette cites as examples Hegel, Viator, and Goethe. Hegel explained the three genres in terms of sociology:

For [Hegel] there exists an epic world defined by a specific type of social aggregate and human relationship; a lyric content (‘the individual subject’) [and]... a dramatic milieu ‘made up of conflicts and collisions’. (Genette, p.212)

Whereas for Viator, the three major genres express “basic attitudes: the lyrical expresses feeling; the epical, knowledge, [and] the dramatic, will and action.’ (Genette, p.212) It is in the work of Goethe, according to Genette, that the differentiation between mode and genre is made clear. Goethe draws a distinction between particular genres, such as the novel, and the three natural forms, which he describes as “the epic, defined as pure narration; the lyric, as a burst of rapture; and the drama, as lifelike representation.’ (Genette, p.212) The natural forms, for Genette, are modes of enunciation. They ‘belong to the category of linguistics...’ whereas genres are ‘literary categories’ defined by thematic content. (Genette, p.213) As soon as discourse is transformed into narrative, it ceases to be a natural form. It is, instead, an aesthetic form. For Genette, the lyrical, epical and dramatic ‘...are external to any literary definition [and instead are]...kinds of archigenres’ (Genette, p.213), which

⁵ Gerard Genette, ‘The Architext: An Introduction’ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) pp. 60-72. Re-printed in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Pearson, 2000), p. 212. Henceforth Genette.

contain within them a number of empirical genres that may be divided in turn into several sub-genres.

In a similar argument Yury Tynyanov, in his essay “The Literary Fact”, states that the theory of literature does not use as its foundation, definitions, simply because literature is a dynamic rather than a static form. Because literature is continuously evolving it is impossible to apply to it a fixed definition. And in turn the same can be said of genre, which is constantly changing. Tynyanov says that:

genre dislocates itself, we see before us the broken line, not a straight line, of its evolution – and this evolution takes place precisely at the expense of the fundamental features of the genre.⁶

This idea of genre as evolutionary has its basis in the fact that early literary theorists attempted to decode genre, using the rules that applied to science, mathematics and the Darwinian theory of evolution. John Frow examines and refutes this idea, by saying that in order for such a system of classification to work, it must be based on the following three principles, as advocated by Bowker and Star:

1. There are consistent, unique classificatory principles in operation, such as atomic weight or genetic sequencing.
2. The categories are mutually exclusive.
3. The system is complete.⁷

This, according to Frow, was the neoclassical approach to genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Genre was viewed as something that had ‘normative rules with universal validity, rather than as ad hoc, changing and [with] inherently fuzzy practices.’⁸ Arguing against the theory of evolution, Frow states that:

genres are facts of culture, which can only with difficulty be mapped onto facts of nature...[and moreover] the morphology of any genre is open-ended and indeterminate in comparison with the biological species, because it involves no genetic continuity.’ (Frow, p.70)

⁶ Yury Tynyanov, ‘The Literary Fact’ (Moscow: Nauka, 1977). Reprinted in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Pearson, 2000), p. 32.

⁷ Geoffrey C Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, ‘Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences’ (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). Cited by John Frow in *Genre: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 10-11.

⁸ John Frow, *Genre: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 52. Henceforth Frow.

He also points out that genres, unlike biological species, are interfertile. Genres can be mixed regardless of their origin or thematic concerns. For Frow, texts do not belong to genres, rather they employ uses of genre, and one text may employ the use of several genres, but not be defined by any one. This is a point that is also made by Jacques Derrida who says that “every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.”⁹

Unlike the many anti-genre theorists, Frow makes arguments in favour of genre, saying that genre sets limitations and constraints on the understanding of a text, therefore enabling meaning-making to take place. “Genre [according to Frow] like formal structures generally, works at a level of semiosis, which is deeper and more forceful than that of the explicit content of a text. (Frow, p.10)

Derrida also notes the rules and limits of genre, but in doing so he emphasises the paradoxical nature of applying genre theory to a text. Firstly, he states that ‘the law of genre is a law of purity, a law against miscegenation.’ Therefore, genres cannot be mixed. Because texts are said to make use of genre, however, not to belong to a particular genre, the law of genre is, for Derrida destabilised:

The law of genre is from the very beginning undermined by its lack of hold over the texts which it seems to regulate; genre, the law of genre as “orders principle” is encountered by the madness of genre, by the fact that there is no madness without the law, no law without the madness. (Derrida, p.252)

Frow, too, recognises the paradoxical nature of the law of genre. He believes that genre is open-ended, that no text belongs to a genre, but participates in one or several genres. Like Derrida, he says that there is no genreless text, that ‘no text is ever unframed.’ (Frow, p.28)

It is no wonder that the opposing ideas involved in genre theory inspired a vast school of anti-genre theorists who considered abandoning the idea of genre altogether. The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce considered genre theory to negate creativity and in turn the rationale that lies behind all literary theory. Literary analysis for Croce is the antithesis of artistic creation. As soon as you begin to analyse anything aesthetic be it art or literature ‘it destroys expression...the thought of the individual,

⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’. re-printed from *Glyph 7* (1980) in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory*, p. 230. Henceforth Derrida.

by thinking of the Universal.’¹⁰ Croce talks about the theory of artistic and literary kinds. For him, as soon as we begin to analyse an aesthetic creation we make the transition from artist to logician and we cease to think creatively. The act of trying to find logic in creation is redundant, according to Croce, because the two are incompatible: ‘Error begins when we try to deduce the expression from the concept, and to find in what takes its place the laws of the thing whose place is taken.’ (Croce, p.11) Instead of looking at a work of art and asking what it expresses, theorists ask if the work obeys the laws of genre, ‘if it obeys the laws of epic or tragedy, of historical painting or landscape.’ (Croce, p.11) But for Croce every true work of art has broken the restrictions of genre. They have ‘upset the ideas of the critics, who have been obliged to broaden the kinds, until finally the broadened kind has proved too narrow.’ (Croce, p.11) So for Croce, like Derrida and Frow, works of art or literature do not belong to genres, they adapt the usage of multiple genres. The only use of genre for Croce is for the pragmatic reason of arranging books on shelves, or to give an understanding of a text, or group of texts. The mistake arises, he says, not in naming a book as a particular kind, but in trying to attach a scientific definition to a particular work, such as epic or tragedy.

If the definition of genres has proved a difficult subject, there is no more difficult a genre to define than the novel, according to Mikhail Bakhtin. We have spoken so far of the genre being dynamic rather than static, and this is the principal argument that Bakhtin makes in relation to the novel. The novel, as the youngest of the genres, is for Bakhtin uncompleted, and thereby evades definition. He compares the novel with older, more antiquated genres such as the epic, which he considers to be complete. Speaking of the other genres, Bakhtin says:

The life they have in history, the life with which we are familiar, is the life they have lived as already completed genres, with a hardened and no longer flexible skeleton. Each of them has developed its own canon that operates in literature as an authentic historical force.’¹¹

¹⁰ Benedetto Croce, ‘Criticism of the Theory of Artistic and Literary Kinds’ (London: Peter Owen, 1953), pp. 35. Re-printed in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Pearson, 2000), p. 26. Henceforth Croce.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel’, in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 70. Henceforth Bakhtin.

Other older genres, according to Bakhtin, 'retain their ancient oral and auditory characteristics.' Studying them, he says, 'is analogous to studying dead languages...' whereas to study the novel is to study something that is not only alive, but continuously evolving. (Bakhtin, p.70) For Bakhtin the novel both parodies and revolutionises other genres. He looks at the periods in history when the novel became the primary genre, when it 'reigned supreme.' These historical epochs; the Hellenic Period, the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the latter half of the eighteenth century, periods of great historical change, embraced the novel form. Other genres were altered under the influence of the novel. They were, according to Bakhtin 'novelised.' He cites as examples the naturalist drama of Henrik Ibsen, and the epic poetry of Byron. The novelistic form lent to these genres its tendency towards open-endedness and flexibility. It imbued them with 'laughter, irony, humour...[and the] indeterminacy... [of a] still-evolving contemporary reality.' (Bakhtin, p.72)

Bakhtin makes the point that the novel is the only genre 'that was born and nourished in a new era of world history.' (Bakhtin, p.70) It is the immediacy of the genre, its contemporaneous nature that gives it the authority to act as social commentary on the historical periods in which texts are written. This is the point that I wish to examine in the following chapters, why certain literary genres have, as Bakhtin says 'reigned supreme' during particular periods in Irish history – and how these genres have succeeded in depicting a realistic social and political view of the decades in which they were written. For Bakhtin:

The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it. (Bakhtin, p.73)

According to Bakhtin, the inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it comes to defining the novel. Theorists make the error of trying to define it as a completed genre when it is in fact unfinished. Unlike the other genres, a definitive canon, 'one that would function as a well-defined system of rigid generic factors' (Bakhtin, p.73) continues to elude literary theorists, simply because there are so many variants on the form. Bakhtin points out that despite attempts at naming the characteristics of the novel as a genre, theorists have not been able to do so without admitting to numerous exceptions to the rule, which immediately 'disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic.' (Bakhtin, p.73) Bakhtin provides us with a rather lengthy list of these

characteristics complete with reservations about what the novel was deemed to be during the latter half of the eighteenth century. One example is as follows: ‘The novel is a multi-layered genre...(although there also exist magnificent single-layered novels.) Another: ‘The novel is a precisely plotted and dynamic genre. (although there also exist novels that push to its literary limits the art of pure description.)’ (Bakhtin, p.74)

The negation of such characteristics of the novel raises questions about the idea of genre itself. This is a point that Tzvetan Todorov makes in his 1976 essay ‘The Origin of Genres.’ Todorov admits that genres existed in what he calls ‘the good old days of classicism,’¹² but he questions whether they continue to exist in modern and particularly ‘modernist’ times. He quotes nineteenth century theorist Maurice Blanchot for whom modernist works interrogate the essence of literature:

The book is the only thing that matters, the book as it is, far from genres, outside of the categorical sub-divisions – prose, poetry, novel, document – in which it refuses to lodge and to which it denies the power of establishing its place and determining its form. A book no longer belongs to a genre; every book belongs to literature alone.¹³

Although Todorov presents Blanchot’s argument, he does not agree with this denial of the existence of genres. For him, genre does not cease to exist; instead older genres evolve and are transformed into other genres. ‘A new genre [he says] is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several, by inversion, by displacement, by combination.’ (Todorov, p.107) He takes up Derrida’s argument regarding the paradoxical law of genre, reinforcing Derrida’s point that there is ‘no madness without the law, no law without the madness.’ In order to be disobeyed, the law must first exist:

The fact that a work disobeys its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist. It is tempting to say the contrary for two reasons. First because, in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law – precisely the one that is to be violated. [And secondly]...because no sooner is it recognised in its exceptional status than the work becomes a rule in turn, because of its commercial success and the critical attention it receives. (Todorov, p.196)

¹² Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Origin of Genres’ in *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Reprinted in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Pearson, 2000), p. 194. Henceforth Todorov.

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre a venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), as cited by Todorov, p. 195.

As an example of this point, Todorov refers to the work of James Joyce. In breaking all of the conventions of genre Joyce in fact establishes new rules for modernist literature. Joyce's work, particularly *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, have been cited by several theorists as texts that negate the existence of genre. This is a point taken up by Alistair Fowler in his essay 'Transformations of genre.' Fowler refers to *Ulysses* as an anti-novel. He examines theorist A. Walton Litz's argument that the intention in the construction of *Ulysses* is to "disintegrate the well-made novel into its origins, and then to perform a prodigious act of re-integration."¹⁴ For Litz, Joyce denies the validity of genres. This is a point, however, that Fowler contests – for Fowler, Joyce has not, as Litz and other theorists claim, "gone beyond the novel", he has simply 'gone beyond... certain recent genres in the novel.'¹⁵ Fowler returns to the point made by Yury Tynyanov that genres are dynamic entities, which continue to constantly evolve, and the anti-novel for him is simply another step in that evolutionary journey of genres. *Ulysses*, he states, should not pose a problem for genre theorists 'unless [that theorist] has an unhistorical conception of fixed kinds.' (Fowler, p.240)

The emergence of particular genres in certain historical periods is something of significance from a sociological point of view. According to Todorov, 'it is not a coincidence that the epic is possible in one period, the novel in another.' (Todorov, p.200) For Todorov, genres are not free from the ideologies of the society in which they are formed. Rather, they are institutionalised, and reflect the dominant ideology of that society from which they emerge. This point is, he says, of particular interest to the ethnologist and the historian:

the [ethnologist] will see in a genre system first of all the categories that differentiate it from that of the neighbouring peoples; correlations will have to be established between these categories and other elements of the same culture. The same is true for the historian: each epoch has its own system of genres, which stands in some relation to the dominant ideology, and so on. Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong. (Todorov, p.200)

¹⁴ A. Walton Litz, 'The Genre of Ulysses' in John Halperin, ed., *The Theory of the Novel* (NY and London: 1974). As quoted by Alistair Fowler in 'Transformation of Genre', in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 240.

¹⁵ Alistair Fowler, 'Transformations of Genre', in David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Pearson, 2000), p.240. Henceforth Fowler.

This idea of genre as an ideological reflection of the society from which it emerges is a major point argued by cultural materialists, and is one which I wish to investigate in relation to Irish crime fiction in the chapters that follow. For Heather Worthington:

Cultural materialism locates literary texts in the broad context of its historical moment...it recognises the subjectivity of the reader and of what has been written; it exposes and explores issues of power and ideology; it considers the past and its relationship to the present. Perhaps above all, as far as crime fiction is concerned, it reads history as a text and as comprised of texts; it rejects hierarchical distinctions between high and low literature.¹⁶

Focussing on Irish crime fiction, the following chapters explore the evolution of the crime fiction genre – a genre that was once condemned by critics for its subject matter, but which has become for many contemporary literary critics the genre which because of its “immediate response to its cultural moment and its concern with the deviant makes it particularly suited to cultural materialist analysis.” (Worthington, p.162)

¹⁶ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 162. Henceforth Worthington.

Chapter Two – A Literary Crime

In the previous chapter I have outlined the various arguments presented by leading literary theorists on the question of genre. The debate about whether or not genre exists and to what extent a novel can be said to belong to a genre continues to be a matter of dispute amongst writers and theorists today. For some, genre is redundant. All that matters is whether a book is good or bad. But for others, the question of ‘high’ or ‘low’ literature, literary fiction versus genre fiction, remains a contentious issue.

Crime fiction, initially condemned by literary theorists for its prioritising of plot over character and for its perceived distance from reality, is a dynamic genre which has undergone many structural changes over the decades. It is, however, as Heather Worthington points out:

those elements that had initially elicited the strongest opprobrium that finally made crime fiction a suitable literary case for treatment by critical theory. The very conventions, the strict structural patterns, the lack of emphasis on character, the revelations about society inherent in this popular and immediate genre brought it to the attention of academics and literary critics as the 20th Century progressed.¹⁷

Despite having been defended by such literary luminaries as Edward Bulwer Lytton and Charles Dickens as a genre that both “permitted an exploration of the deepest modes of emotion and human suffering in humanity” and that “reason[ed] that crime was often evidence for or the consequence of social deprivation,” (Worthington, p.152) the genre had until the 1920’s been ignored by literary critics as something populist, and which was, therefore, unworthy of academic attention.

It was during this period known as the Golden Age of crime fiction that critics began to recognise the critical potential of the genre. In the USA, the classical detective novel or clue-puzzle, where the detective worked more for intellectual pleasure than for monetary gain, had been replaced by the more cynical detective of the hard-boiled variety who worked out of necessity whilst also serving as what Peter Messent refers to as “an individual example of honesty and integrity in a modernized urban world generally associated with greed, chicanery, economy and political

¹⁷ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), p. 153. Henceforth Worthington.

corruption.”¹⁸ In this modern urbanised America, the crime novel became “a tool to dissect society’s flaws and failures, and to expose the wrong turns that a capitalist economy, and the political structures to which it was allied, had taken.” (Messent, p.17) The hard-boiled detective novel was hailed, not only by critics, but also by writers as a more realistic representation of modern America. Raymond Chandler “attacking what he saw as the artificiality, exoticism, mental gymnastics, and elaborate props of golden age fiction” praised Dashiell Hammet for what he referred to as the realism of his novels. “Hammet [he said] took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it in the alley...He put these people down on paper as they [were], and made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes...” (Messent, p.17) For Hammet, the hard-boiled crime novel was “a product of its America, a form more appropriate than the classical model to a society that seemed out of joint; when anxieties about crime, capitalism, and the conditions of urban life were increasingly and urgently pressing.” (Messent, p.35)

For Heather Worthington, the Marxist message in cultural materialism is evident in its eagerness to show “the ways in which literature reveals the dominant ideas and ideals of society in any given moment and equally therefore exposes the ideologies that invisibly support that society and maintain the social, often class-inflected structures of power.” (Worthington, p.161) This is particularly true of crime fiction whose immediacy allows it to respond to issues intrinsic to modern society. The genre, initially ignored by theorists as something populist and of little or no theoretical value, has become, as Laura Marcus points out:

central to psychoanalytical, hermeneutic, structuralist, semiotic, and poststructuralist narrative theories, and has been deployed both to secure and to trouble literary borders and boundaries, including the distinction between high and low literature and the divide between modernist and postmodernist fiction.¹⁹

Post-structuralist theorists such as Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Derrida have cited the genre “to illustrate and explicate their readings of the body – corpus – of literature.” (Worthington, p.ix) For them, crime fiction is about the desire to reveal that which is

¹⁸ Peter Messent, *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 17. Henceforth Messent.

¹⁹ Laura Marcus, ‘Detection and Literary Fiction’, in Martin Priestman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 245. Henceforth Marcus.

concealed and to decode that which is unspoken. In this way, “the very process of literary analysis is closely aligned to the work of the detective in fiction.” (Marcus, p.245)

Nowadays, along with the above-mentioned theoretical fields of thought, crime fiction is analysed in relation to such concepts as feminism, race, class, postcolonialism, and the aforementioned cultural materialism – areas, which, heretofore, had been explored only in relation to literary fiction.

So what is crime fiction and how is it distinguished from literary fiction? For Heather Worthington, “the game of defining the constituent texts and textual constituents of the crime fiction genre has been played by many critics over time.” (Marcus, p.245) She points out that the simplest definition: a narrative that features a crime complicates rather than clarifies the meaning. If a narrative that features a crime belongs to the crime genre, then the genre may be said to contain such vastly differing narratives as the bible story Cain and Abel, Cain commits a crime and is therefore punished for it, to the fairytale Little Red Riding Hood to Shakespeare’s MacBeth. All of these narratives employ the use of the crime genre – but that is not to say that they belong to the genre.

Crime writers as well as theorists question the differences between the crime genre and literary fiction. For some, such as Alan Glynn, the boundaries of the crime genre are becoming broader. Writers are less confined by the conventions of genre than in the past. For Glynn, just as Irish literary novels contain significant elements of crime fiction:

many of the finest examples of recent Irish crime fiction contain what might be considered significant elements of literary fiction – depth of characterisation, subtle and poetic use of language, and a keen willingness to explore the darker corners of human nature. So it seems to work both ways now. Lines are blurring, parameters broadening, and there’s a whole lot of cross-fertilisation going on.²⁰

In this thesis, I aim to trace the evolution of Irish crime fiction beginning with narratives that feature crimes, but are classed as literary rather than crime novels. The two literary novels, which I have chosen to analyse in this chapter; Patrick McCabe’s groundbreaking novel *The Butcher Boy* and John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* both feature the crime which, by the 1920’s, had become essential to the crime genre:

²⁰ Alan Glynn, ‘Murder in Mind: The Irish Literary Crime Novel’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 129.

that of murder. In analysing these novels, I aim to take a cultural materialist approach, looking at how novels, both literary and crime, reflect the society and times from which they emerge.

The Butcher Boy is set in Ireland during the 1960's, and is told from a distance of "twenty or thirty or forty years" when Francie Brady recounts how "the whole town was after [him] on account of what [he] done to Mrs Nugent."²¹ The 1960's was a significant decade regarding social and economic change in Ireland. In December, 1961 Telefis Eireann began broadcasting, and in so doing revealed to a previously insular society the influences of the outside world. On its opening night the President of Ireland, Eamon de Valera in his inaugural address described both the advantages and disadvantages of the new medium, saying that "like atomic energy it can be used for incalculable good, but it can also do irreparable harm."²² De Valera, who during his term in presidency had strived to preserve and promote Irish culture, was suspicious of the external effect that television may have on Ireland. His fears were partly founded as the broadcaster often relied on imported cultures and programmes. This is seen in *The Butcher Boy* as the young Francie Brady, suffering from an identity crisis, identifies mostly with the characters in such American and British TV shows as *The Lone Ranger* and *The Fugitive*.

According to civil servant and Irish language activist, Sean de Freine in 1965, "English culture was more pervasive in Ireland than the native one."²³ Freine claimed that, "English cultural influence [was] reflected in the interest aroused in Ireland in any matter [that was] topical in Britain." (Ferriter, p.540) Topics discussed by Irish debating societies were those pertinent to post-war life in Britain, and "England's domestic affairs – the big new law cases and murder trials, her political doings, financial affairs and sports events [were] extensively reported in Ireland." (Ferriter, p.540) It is the relationship between Francie and the Nugents that is at the centre of the *The Butcher Boy*, and which critics such as Tim Gauthier have read as a representation of the struggle between the coloniser and the colonised subject. For Gauthier, the schizophrenic identity of Francie mirrors the identity crisis of Ireland post-colonisation. "The struggles of Francie Brady in the *Butcher Boy* invoke both

²¹ Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 1. Henceforth McCabe.

²² Martin McCloone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 217.

²³ Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p. 540. Henceforth Ferriter.

neo-colonial Ireland's anguished residual relationship with the colonizer and its search for nationhood.²⁴ The Nugents, in the novel, represent an economic upsurge and a change in class structure in Ireland. Having recently returned from England, the Nugents are seen as the representatives of the upper class in this small rural community. It is not uncommon after colonisation for neo-colonial states to form a hierarchy based on connection with the coloniser, and it is the time that the Nugents have spent in England that places them in a superior position to a family such as the Bradys. Francie's Uncle Alo is also revered by the community for the time that he has spent in London. When he comes home for Christmas Francie says that he couldn't "stop looking at him, the gold tiepin, and his polished nails, the English voice. Nugent's was only half-English. The more you thought about it the harder it was to believe that Nugent had ever been anything worth talking about." (McCabe, p.27) Francie's dual abhorrence of and fascination with the Nugents and his reverence of Uncle Alo represent the paradoxical nature of the relationship between the coloniser and colonised. Although the colonised subject yearns to rid himself of the coloniser, he also longs for all that the coloniser is and has.

The trouble between Francie and the Nugents begins when Francie and his friend Jo Purcell have a comic-swapping session with Philip Nugent, deciding to take all of Philip's pristinely-kept comics leaving him with, what Francie refers to as "a pile of junk." (McCabe, p.3) Mrs Nugent, livid at having discovered this, calls round to the Brady's house in order to retrieve her son's comics, but rather than simply complaining about Francie's behaviour, she makes a personal class-based attack on the Brady family, "...what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about the pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig...Small wonder the boy is the way he is what chance has he got running about the town at all hours...Pigs, sure the whole town knows that!" (McCabe, p.4) It is from this moment that Francie, much like the colonised subject, adopts the identity that Mrs Nugent forces upon him, referring to himself thereafter as Francie Pig. Gauthier argues that Mrs Nugent's attack on the Brady family is also an attempt to forge her own identity. For "in times of socio-cultural stress, when the need for positive self-definition asserts itself but no compelling criterion of self-identification appears, it is always possible to say something like "I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but

²⁴ Tim Gauthier, 'Identity, self-loathing and the neo-colonial condition in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*' in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (Washington DC: Winter 2003), p. 196.

I am most certainly not like that” and simply point to something in the landscape that is manifestly different from oneself.’ (Gauthier, p.198) Francie becomes a reference point for Mrs Nugent and the community for their own unstable identities, the other by which they might define themselves.

Prejudiced as Mrs Nugent’s attack is, unfortunately it is an accurate account of life in the Brady household. Francie’s mother is a fragile woman, a victim of beatings by her alcoholic husband, she attempts on a number of occasions to take her own life and after each failed attempt she is taken to what Francie refers to as ‘the garage’. When Francie’s mother asks him “you would never let me down, would you?” Francie interprets this as “you wouldn’t let me down like da did.” (McCabe, p.4) He tells his mother that “he wouldn’t let her down in a hundred million years” (McCabe, p.5), and it is this conversation that evokes the guilt that plagues Francie from the time of his mother’s suicide, during a time when he has run away from home.

Alcoholism was, by the 1960’s a recognised social problem in Irish society. In 1961 a special unit was opened in the St John of God’s hospital in Dublin for those suffering from alcoholism. According to the Central Statistics office “between 1948 and 1970 consumption of alcohol rose by 60%, with consumption increasing by a full litre per person in the years 1965-1970.” (Ferriter, p.594) In November 1966, the Minister for Health announced the establishment of an Irish National Council on Alcoholism, which was founded by a reformed alcoholic. “From 1960 to 1967 admissions to psychiatric hospitals for drink-related illnesses rose from 404 to 2,015, and by the end of the decade, there were about 800,000 drinkers in the Republic who spent £80 million a year on alcohol.” (Ferriter, p.594)

Benny Brady constantly returns to the house drunk, and the young Francie listens from the landing as his father curses his mother during their arguments, saying “God’s curse the fucking day I ever set eyes on you.” (McCabe, p.7) Francie’s guilt at never having defended his mother during these arguments is revealed when he reports hearing Mrs Nugent say to Philip, “Just stands there and lets the father do what he likes to her. You’d never do the like of that, would you Philip? You’d always stand by me, wouldn’t you?” (McCabe, p.11) It is doubtful that Mrs Nugent said any such thing; it is Francie’s guilt that conjures these conversations and leads to his persecution complex, particularly when it comes to Mrs Nugent.

Benny Brady’s alcoholism is blamed on childhood trauma, in much the same way as Francie’s psychosis stems from his dysfunctional childhood. The word “home” is

to be avoided in the company of Brady. According to Francie, “when you said it even when you weren’t talking about orphanages, da went pale. Sometimes he even got up and left the room.” (McCabe, p.32) In the one argument where Francie hears his mother stand up to his father, she says, “Christ Jesus Benny, are you never going to come to terms with it! After all this time, is it never going to end?” (McCabe, p.34) She goes on to say, “...it destroyed you that place, can’t you see that? You can’t even talk about it, can you? Not after all this time.” (McCabe, p.35)

During the 1950’s the care and treatment of children placed in industrial schools had begun to be questioned, although the majority of allegations of serious abuse was not revealed until many years later. “One of the few lengthy references came to the Dail in 1954, when a TD raised the concerns of a constituent whose son, an inmate of Artane Industrial School, was in hospital after a vicious beating by a Christian brother.” (Ferriter, p.512) The response of the government in relation to this allegation was to dismiss it as ‘an accident.’ The minister to whose attention the case was brought said that he “[could] not conceive any sadism emanating from men who were trained to have devotion to a very high purpose...accidents happen [he went on to say] in the best-regulated families and in this family there are about 800 boys.” (Ferriter, p.512) Over a decade later, in 1969, the extent of corporal punishment in Irish schools was highlighted by a journalist from the London Daily Telegraph magazine who expressed shock at the “the toleration of public beatings in schools, asserting that in Irish Church schools in particular, ‘every day many endure thrashings which, in England, would be enough to close the school and start an inquiry.’” (Ferriter, p.558) It was not until the 1990’s that many victims of such abuse were compensated for the beatings, rape and sexual abuse inflicted on them by the Christian Brothers who ran such industrial schools.

Just as Benny Brady is unable to talk about the time that he spent in the orphanage in Belfast because of the appalling experiences he had there, Francie, for his part, deals with his bad experiences by refusing to take them seriously. He says that everything, good and bad, is “a right laugh.” This is how he refers to his own abuse at the hands of Fr Sullivan, who he nicknames “Fr Tiddly” in the industrial school where he is sent following the incident where he vandalised and defecated in Mrs Nugent’s house. Tiddly abuses Francie, who privately ridicules him, and bribes him with cigarettes and Rolos. Francie, when re-telling these events, seems not to mind Tiddly’s behaviour, saying that he felt “like laughing [his] arse off” at him. (McCabe,

p.90) It is not until Tiddly starts demanding to know details about Francie's home life that Francie turns on him. Francie, rather than describing his own house, describes the Nugents'. And as he does so, he imagines a conversation between his mother and Mrs Nugent where Mrs Nugent says, "Do you know he did? He asked me to be his mother." (McCabe, p.90) It is at this point that Francie attacks Tiddly, not because of the sexual abuse but because Tiddly made him admit to himself that he was envious of the Nugents' stable family-life.

Francie doesn't admit to the horror of what Tiddly did to him until he relays the story to Joe Purcell, his childhood best friend. As he tells Joe the story, he says, "I couldn't stop laughing, the bonnet and Tiddly, I love you, and the whole lot. You want to see the Rolos he gave me [he says] I must've ate about two thousand fucking Rolos." (McCabe, p.97) When Joe starts to ask Francie *why* Tiddly gave him the Rolos, Francie doesn't want to talk about it, but eventually he tells him. Joe's response is one of disbelief and revulsion, which makes Francie break out in a "cold sweat" and retract the story, saying "I fairly fooled you there, Joe. Tiddly! Imagine someone doing the like of that! Tiddly! Rolos – for fuck's sake." (McCabe, p.98) It is only when Francie witnesses Joe's reaction that he sees the horror of Tiddly's abuse – which before he tried to see as a ridiculous game, "a right laugh!"

After the death of his mother, the biggest blow to befall Francie is the loss of Joe Purcell's friendship. Joe is the only person who listens to Francie, and is his closest emotional link to a community in which he is otherwise ostracised. When Francie comes home from the industrial school, the Purcells refuse to allow Joe to socialise with Francie, telling him each time that he calls to the house that Joe is not home. Francie then begins to wait for Joe after school, but it is clear that the friendship between the two boys has changed. Joe Purcell has developed, whereas Francie hasn't. Francie blames Mrs Nugent for Joe not wanting to be friends with him anymore, particularly because Joe's new friend is Philip Nugent. When Buttsy, Mrs Nugent's brother, and his friend Devlin catch up with Francie and beat him up, they ask Joe "what are you hanging around with him for?" Joe answers, "I'm not hanging around with him. I *used to* hang around with him." (McCabe, p.111) This answer is unbearably painful for Francie. Without Joe, he has nobody to understand him.

One of the most moving scenes in *The Butcher Boy* is when Francie finds his father dead in the armchair surrounded by bottles. He feels his forehead, which is "as cold as ice" and refusing to accept that he is dead, he tells him "Don't worry da. I'll look after

you...I might have let you down before but not this time.” (McCabe, p.119) Francie imagines that his father answers him, that for the first time they are communicating as father and son, and he cries with happiness. In his mind, he hears his father say, “You won’t leave me son?” And he says, “...He didn’t have to worry. [He] wasn’t going to leave him. [He] wasn’t going to let [his] ma or da or anyone down ever again.” (McCabe, p.121) This scene echoes the earlier one in which Francie told his mother that he’d never let her down. Plagued by guilt about her death, he refuses to acknowledge his father’s death – instead taking a job in Leddy’s as a butcher boy in order to earn money to look after his already dead father.

When Doctor Roche calls to the house and discovers Benny Brady’s body, Francie takes his first trip to “the garage.” Francie has many delusions during that time until they put him on tablets, which stabilise him. When Francie is released from the institution, he decides to exact his revenge on the one person he holds responsible for ruining his life, Mrs Nugent. Francie convinces Leddy, the butcher to give him another chance as his butcher boy, and “...[taking] the captive bolt pistol down off the nail where it was hanging and [getting] the butcher’s steel knife out of the drawer,” (McCabe, p.193) Francie sets about killing Mrs Nugent in the way that he has learned to kill the pigs in the abattoir, thereby, making her victim to the identity that she forged upon him at the beginning of the novel.

The murder of Mrs Nugent is one of the most gruesome in the history of Irish literature. Francie forces his way into her home, knocks her to the ground and begins to kick her. He tells her “...You did two bad things Mrs Nugent. You made me turn my back on ma and you took Joe away from me.” (McCabe, p.195) He slams Mrs Nugent against the wall several times, and then as she is trying to reach out to him, he “cock[s] the captive bolt.” Describing the scene, Francie says, unemotionally,

I lifted her off the floor with one hand and shot the bolt right into her head *thlok* was the sound it made...If you ask anyone how you kill a pig they will tell you, you cut its throat across but you don’t do it longways. Then she just lay there with her chin sticking up and I opened her, then I stuck my hand in her stomach and wrote PIGS all over the walls of the upstairs room.
(McCabe, p.195)

Francie is perfectly calm after the murder. He puts Mrs Nugent’s body in the cart of brock (waste) that he has collected from the hotel, and ensuring to cover her up, he sets about taking her back to the abattoir to dispose of her body in the pit of pig guts.

After the event Francie feels no remorse, instead he greets ladies in the street, comments on the weather, and even leaves his cart down to go into the newsagents for a packet of cigarettes. At the abattoir, Francie disposes of the body in the pit, and pours lime in on top so that it might decompose quickly.

Francie does not expect to get away with his crime. He is fearless and unrepentant when the policemen come to Leddy's to arrest him, instead laughing in their faces. Francie refuses to say what he has done with Mrs Nugent's body. Finally, he lures the policemen to the chicken house where he and Joe used to spend time. Inside it is dark and Francie manages to escape by swinging a chain at one of the policemen, before running and bolting the door from the outside. His objective is return to the house to commit suicide like his mother before him. Francie builds a bonfire, and before setting it alight he puts on his mother's *Butcher Boy* – a sad song about a woman who commits suicide, which his mother used to play over and over. Francie lies down, prepared to die. He hears his mother tell him “it's over now”, but the butcher boy's suicide attempt, like so many of his mother's in the past is failed because the police arrive to drag him from the house.

Finally, recovered from his injuries, Francie tells the police the whereabouts of Mrs Nugent's body, and he is sent to “the garage” where he will spend an unspecified number of years. The novel ends with Francie poking at a puddle of ice with another patient, just as he did years before with his friend Joe Purcell. Attempting to re-enact his days he spent with Joe, before everything went wrong, Francie tells his new friend that they go tracking in the mountains together, and they set off “counting [their] footprints in the snow, him with his bony arse clicking and [Francie] with the tears streaming down [his] face.” (McCabe, p.215)

The Butcher Boy is a complex and heartbreaking novel, and the horrific murder that Francie commits is reminiscent of some of the most gruesome scenes that take place in the horror genre. Commenting on the novel, writer John Connolly says that while *The Butcher Boy* is not a crime fiction novel, it “...owes its debts to its genre antecedents...that all fiction has, at its heart, a seed of genre.”²⁵ As a writer who incorporates aspects of the supernatural and the macabre into his work, John Connolly is in an unquestionable position to comment on the use of multiple genres in a single

²⁵ John Connolly, ‘No Blacks, No Dogs, No Crime Writers: Ireland and the Mystery Genre’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 42. Henceforth Connolly.

text. Indeed, his incorporation of the supernatural in his novels is something for which he has been criticised by critics who clearly do not believe in genre miscegenation. Connolly believes, however, that some genres have in common the same foundations, and that sociologically they have the same point to make. Speaking of mixing crime and the supernatural, Connolly says:

I also felt that a certain darker crime fiction shared its roots with supernatural fiction. Both were fascinated by intrusion, by the undermining of accepted mores. They constituted a warning about what might happen if one encountered someone – or something – who did not share one’s own assumptions about the world...Both fictions play upon our deepest anxieties, our fears for ourselves and the stability of the society in which we live. (Connolly, p.42)

This is an interesting point when applied to *The Butcher Boy*, which is most often read as a post-colonial text. Francie is the outsider, he cannot be contained, and the community both scorn and live in fear of him. He is *the other* by which they define themselves. The schizophrenic identity of Francie is often interpreted as a representation of Ireland’s own identity crisis following colonisation. Francie’s ambivalent relationship with the community, his unstable personal circumstances, his search for identity and his idealisation of the past, combined with his concurrent attraction and loathing for the Nugent family, who represent the prevailing cultural values, are seen as reflecting the fragmented neo-colonial condition. Francie creates an anxiety in the community, and for this he is shunned in much the same way as the outsider, the monster of the Gothic novel.

Some of John Banville’s earlier novels, *The Untouchable* and particularly *The Book of Evidence* are self-professed crime novels, and yet they are classed as literary. Banville says that both of these novels “...are crime books. They have higher ambitions, [he] suppose[s], but they are essentially books about people who have committed crimes.”²⁶ Commenting on *The Book of Evidence*, crime writer Ruth Rendell interestingly observes “...if all crime novels were like this one, there would no longer be a need for a genre.” Rendell’s obscure comment is open to interpretation. She acknowledges the fact that Banville’s novel is indeed a crime novel, but one, perhaps, that through the quality of the prose transcends genre.

²⁶ Declan Burke, “The Black Stuff: An Interview with John Banville”, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 228. Henceforth Burke.

The Book of Evidence – Banville’s primary crime novel written under his own name is loosely based on the case of Malcom McArthur who cold-bloodedly murdered a young nurse in the Phoenix Park, Dublin in 1982. Attempting to steal Bridie Gargan’s car, McArthur forced her to lie down in the back of the car and when the young woman began to panic and protest, McArthur bludgeoned her to death with a hammer. It was a savage attack, and the case received much media attention when it was discovered that McArthur sought refuge at the home of Patrick Connolly, the then State’s Attorney General.

Banville’s protagonist Freddie Montgomery tells his story from his prison cell as he awaits his trial date. He tells us that he “wishes to claim full responsibility for [his] actions – after all – they are the only things [he] can call his own.” (Banville, p. 16) We learn afterwards that this is indeed true as his mother many years before disinherited him in her will, leaving her house to a stable girl named Joanna who was her companion and who she refers to as “the son [she] never had.” (Banville, p. 75)

From the outset, Montgomery is introspective, so much so that prison seems to suit him. He tells us that when “[he] was young [he] saw [him]self as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around [him]self, a kind of grand pavilion, airy and light, which would contain [him] utterly and yet wherein [he] would be free.” (Banville, p. 75) “Unhoused”, as he puts it, he feels vulnerable. He suggests that he is different to those around him, that “other people seemed to have a density, a thereness, which [he] lacked.” (Banville, p. 16)

He describes himself as “without moorings, a floating phantom,” and indeed at the beginning of his story we are introduced to someone who seems to drift through life without purpose. At least this is how he describes his time drinking and taking the sun on a Mediterranean island.

It is when Freddie borrows money from an American, who in turn borrowed it from a wealthy businessman, that he finds himself in trouble. Thinking that he can blackmail the American, Randolph, by revealing that he made his money by drug dealing, Freddie has no intention of repaying the loan. That changes when one of Randolph’s ears is sent to Freddie in a box, and he is summoned before the businessman, Aguirre, and told simply that loans must be repaid. Given the opportunity to return to Ireland to get the money, Aguirre makes it clear to Freddie that if he doesn’t repay the loan, some undesirable fate will befall Daphne, his wife.

It is this event that sets in motion the actions that will ultimately lead Freddie Montgomery to commit murder. Or so we are led to believe.

It is on the trip home from Spain that Montgomery realises that he is going to do something terrible. He says that it was not a premonition, rather it was a certainty. His reaction to this self-discovery is one of “embarrassment...and a sort of antic glee.” (Banville, p.24) This response becomes characteristic of Montgomery in the aftermath of the crime. He swings between nauseated guilt and a giddy euphoria. It is questionable whether he might suffer from some psychiatric illness. He tells us at one point that as a child he suffered from “bad moods”, which were “very, very black” and that “even when [he] was a child [his] depressions frightened people.” (Banville, p.50)

Montgomery is a psychoanalyst’s dream. Constantly, he refers to his parents, particularly to his father, whom he didn’t have a close relationship with, but with whom he appears obsessed. He mentions Sundays from his childhood when his father took him to Dun Laoghaire, or Kingstown, as he referred to it, and bought him an ice-cream and left him sitting in the back seat of the Morris Oxford to “what he called [his] own devices.” (Banville, p.28) It was only as an adult that he discovered the reasons for these trips, his father was having an affair with another woman who he visited while the child, Montgomery, was left in the car. He describes his father as “always more or less angry, seething with resentment and indignation. Behind the bluster, though, he was a coward. He felt sorry for himself.” (Banville, p.28) He says that he suspects that his father was “a little afraid of [him], and in turn he was “wise enough to be wary” of his father. (Banville, p.29) What they shared, he tells us, was “...a great distaste for the world generally.” (Banville, p.29) It seems, however, from his description of his father that the adult, Montgomery, shares much more with his father than merely this aversion. Both men like to appear gentrified. His father wears expensive clothes, handmade shoes, drinks wine and smokes specially imported cigarettes. Montgomery, for his part, says that the Americans were “captivated by [him]...[his] accent, [his] bow-ties, [and his] slightly sinister, old-world charm.” (Banville, p.19) Having described his father, he tells the reader that he hopes he has not given the impression of disliking him, instead revealing that he “did not think unkindly of him – apart...from wanting to kill him, so that [he] might marry [his] mother.” (Banville, p.30)

Twice during his narrative, Montgomery, digresses into giving further details about his father. When he goes down to the cellar in his mother's house to get a bottle of wine, he is reminded of his father's final months when he spent time "pottering" down there. He gives an account of his father's death, describing in minute detail how his father had his bed pushed halfway out onto the balcony. "He lay there with the covers thrown back, his meagre chest bared, giving himself up to the sun..." (Banville, p.48) He halts his own description abruptly, mid-sentence, as though he cannot bear to go on by saying "Enough. I was speaking of my mother." (Banville, p.48) It is guilt that repeatedly evokes Montgomery's memories of his father's death. Only two pages later, and without warning, he launches into another such recollection. He describes the scene, telling us that he "sat on a chair beside his [father's] bed in the open window and held his hand..." but again he interrupts himself, this time to admit that what he says is fabricated. "Stop, stop it. I was not there... He died alone, slipped away while no one was looking, leaving us to our own devices." (Banville, p.51) The repetition of his father "leaving [him] to his own devices" suggests bitterness towards his father for the lack of attention that he paid him. It may not have been a fraught father-son relationship, but it was without the proximity that Montgomery seemed to crave.

Although Montgomery claims to have had an Oedipal love for his mother, his relationship with her does not appear to have been any better than with that of his father. He describes his mother physically as he perceived her in childhood as "a constant but remote presence, statuesque, blank-eyed, impossibly handsome in an Ancient Roman sort of way, like a marble figure at the far side of a lawn." (Banville, pp. 42-43) This description bears striking resemblance to the earlier description that he provided of his wife, Daphne whom he calls "an abstracted Maya." (Banville, p.8) He says that it was "an abstracted, mildly dissatisfied air which first drew [his] attention to her." (Banville, p.7) This distractedness is also present in the way that Daphne looks after their son, she is distant as his mother was with him. "She neglected our son... simply because his needs did not really interest her. I would catch her, sitting on a chair, looking at him with a remote expression in her eyes, as if she were trying to remember who or what precisely he was, and how he came to be there." (Banville, pp. 7-8) After a ten-year absence Montgomery is irritated only minutes after meeting his mother. It seems that she has the power to undermine him. When she pinches his belly, laughs and tells him that he's got fat, he is infuriated. He

says that he has only to “stand before her and instantly the irritation and resentment begin to seethe in [his] breast.” (Banville, p.42) He asks, “Is it any wonder I have ended up in jail?” as though his mother is responsible for his committing murder. (Banville, p.42)

The word “remote” is used to describe Montgomery’s relationships with those he should have been closest to. He seems to have problems forming relationships; the relationship he shares with Daphne is almost a re-enactment of that with his parents. He admits that he was “deeply affected” by Daphne, but that he didn’t express it. The reasons that he gives for this lack of expression sums up the type of relationship they have: “It was just that such knowledge would have been, well, inappropriate between us. There was a reticence, a tactfulness, which from the first we had silently agreed to preserve.” (Banville, p.9)

Several times Montgomery refers to the darker side of his character. In Wally’s pub, he feels at home, referring to himself as the ogre – he says that he “...enjoys the inappropriate, the disreputable...in low dives...the burden of birth and education falls from [him]...” (Banville, p.32) We are reminded of other such characters from classic novels, such as Dorian Gray, or Mr Hyde who feel the thrill of doing evil deeds outside their upper-class existence. At one point Montgomery refers to himself as “...a quavering Dr Jekyll, inside whom that other, terrible creature chafed and struggled, lusting for experience.” (Banville, p.172) He describes the feeling of power that he has having committed the crime, saying that it “...sprang not from what [he] had done, but from the fact that [he] had done it and no one knew.” (Banville, p.172)

During the ten days spent in Charlie French’s house, Montgomery continues to swing between feelings of sickness and guilt, and maddened euphoria. He awaits capture, and in a perverse way longs for it. He expects to feel panicked when he discovers that the police have finally caught up with him, but instead “...a kind of wild-eyed euphoria takes hold of [him].” (Banville, p.185) This feeling continues even as he is arrested and led to the police car. He says that he “...seemed not to walk but bound along, brimful of tigerish energy.” (Banville, p.191) Montgomery seems always to struggle with conflicting emotions revealing his dual nature. Once in the police car, he seems glad to be in custody. Through his actions he has attained the kind of attention that he has craved, and which his parents failed to provide:

I had never in my life been so entirely the centre of attention. From now on I would be watched over, I would be tended and fed and listened to, like a big, dangerous babe. No more running, no more hiding and waiting, no more decisions. I snuggled down between my captors, enjoying the hot chafe of metal on my wrists. (Banville, p.193)

Almost immediately this feeling of fulfilment is replaced by one of sorrow and loss, but he can't say of what, except that "...some deep cavern of [his] heart was filling up with the grief of renunciation and departure." (Banville, p.193) Montgomery is a character prone to deep feelings of self-pity. This is clearly related to the depression, which he has suffered from since his youth. When he is in his prison cell, he begins to feel degraded, but he feels that this is proper fate. He claims that he is "no longer wholly human [but] hasten[s] to say this seemed quite proper, to be, indeed, a kind of setting to rights, an official and outward definition of what had been the case...all along. I had [he says] achieved my apotheosis." (Banville, p.202) This last claim is extremely interesting. In committing murder, Montgomery finds himself degraded, but paradoxically he feels that he has reached his highest point of development – that his ultimate goal was to end in this way.

When Inspector Haslet asks him if he wants to talk to him, to tell him what happened, he tells us that he wanted "...to talk and talk, to confide in him, to pour out all [his] poor secrets." But then he asks himself "what secrets?" (Banville, p.197) Repeatedly, Montgomery is asked to give his account of what happened, and each time he fabricates the story, so that it begins to sound improbable even to him. When Barker, one of the policemen, impatiently interrupts his story to ask why he killed the girl, Montgomery answers: "I killed her because I could, what more can I say?" (Banville, p.198) It is this one sentence that appears to be the truth in all of Freddie Montgomery's confessions. He is an unreliable narrator, and Banville leaves us wondering whether his previous tales of knowing Anna Behrens, and attempting to steal the masterpiece are true. The whole thing seems a fanciful invention of this disturbed mind. When he tells Haslet his story, eager to please, he asks if he might do anything else, Haslet tells him that "...what [he] can do is get his story straight, without the frills and the fancy bits." (Banville, p.201) The novel ends on a particularly ambiguous note, with Montgomery saying that he had considered publishing his testimony, but decided in the end to ask Inspector Haslet to "...put it into [his] file, with the other, official fictions." (Banville, p.220) The last paragraph of *The Book of Evidence* suggests that Freddie Montgomery is a deluded killer, one who

has invented numerous fictional excuses as to why he killed a woman simply because he could:

He [Haslet] gave me a wry look. Did you put in about being a scientist, he said, and knowing the Behrens woman, and owing money, all that stuff? I smiled. It's my story, I said, and I'm sticking to it. He laughed at that. Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true? It was the first time he had called me by my name. True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame. (Banville, p.220)

Both *The Book of Evidence* and *The Butcher Boy* are told from the point of view of the perpetrator of the crime. This is a technique more in keeping with the conventions of literary rather than crime fiction. The confessional, albeit unreliable, voice of the protagonist evokes in the reader a sense of cohesion, and empathy towards the killer. We attempt to excuse his behaviour through psychological reasoning. Montgomery has been deprived of the love of his parents, and he is, therefore incapable of forming close relationships. The fact that he welcomes his capture, and is pleased at being the centre of attention, albeit by the detective and the police force, reinforces our sympathy towards this man who has, since childhood, been denied the intimacy that helps most evolved adults to determine right from wrong. Francie Brady, too, has been denied a stable environment. He has been made to feel inferior to people like the Nugents, not through any fault of his own, but through the actions of his alcoholic father. Francie is a victim of a dysfunctional family, and it is this that appears to lead to his psychological problems and ultimately to the murder of Mrs Nugent, which seems an inevitable conclusion to Francie's time in an uncaring community.

The complex and psychological nature of both these novels is, for me, what separates them from conventional crime fiction. There is no doubting that they contain elements of the crime fiction genre, and in the case of *The Butcher Boy* elements of both fantasy and horror genres, too. The fact, also, that Banville's novel is loosely based on an actual crime brings to it an element of historical fiction.

Both novels are, essentially, dealing with murder and its aftermath, but neither is considered genre novels. According to writer John Connolly, "The mistake that some genre enthusiasts make is to assume that the presence of genre seeds in a novel means, de facto, a genre novel, which is like arguing that a novel with a cow in it is, to all intents and purposes, a book about cows." (Connolly, p.43) Connolly's humorously made observation carries weight, however, when we consider John Frow's point that

novels do not belong to genres, rather they employ the use of genre. Because a murder is the central theme of a novel, it is not necessarily classified as a crime fiction novel.

Classification serves two purposes, the first; the practical purpose of arranging books on shelves, and the second that genre is used as a marketing tool. It is no bad thing in Ireland nowadays to have your book marketed as a genre novel. In the last year especially crime fiction has taken over from women's fiction as the number one bestseller.

To return once again to Alan Glynn's point, genres are becoming broader and broader, and the quality of much contemporary Irish crime writing, is undoubtedly on a par with its literary counterpart. John Banville attempts to explain the current popularity of Irish crime fiction by looking at how it reflects contemporary society:

up to the early nineties literature in this country was the higher stuff...everyone was writing in the grand tradition...[however]...with the sudden growth of popular culture in the nineties a whole new generation of people emerged who weren't interested in higher art, weren't interested in stylists, were far more interested in society, in manners, in the ways in which we actually live. (Burke, p.231)

I agree with Banville as regards the fact that Irish crime fiction reflects, in a way that no other genre does, the society in which we live today. I disagree, however, with the notion that the quality of the writing is inferior to that of literary novels. There are far too many examples of superior prose in the genre of Irish crime writing for this statement to withstand analysis. In the next chapter, I will explore what is deemed the precursor of the contemporary Irish crime novel, and which is, again, a hybrid of the literary meets crime genre. This particular range of novels is set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and explores the work of writers such as Brian Moore, who is said to have moved effortlessly between crime and literary writing.

Chapter Three – Political Fiction

The last ten years has seen a surge in the popularity of Irish crime fiction, but an oft-asked question is why has it taken so long for Irish crime fiction to come into its own? Many writers and theorists have put this down to what was happening in Northern Ireland in the period up until the IRA Ceasefire in 1994, namely what is referred to as the ‘Troubles’. Writer John Connolly cites several reasons why native crime fiction, in a period when it prospered in other countries, may not have done so in the homeland. Firstly, he states that “...it is difficult to write about a common-or-garden murder, the stuff of mainstream mysteries, when, a couple of hours up the road from Dublin, soldiers, policemen, and civilians are being killed on a daily basis.”²⁷ Citing the crimes related to the Troubles; “drug-dealing, smuggling, the importation of pornography, protection rackets, [and] bank raids, Connolly points out that writers may also have been reluctant to write about these crimes for fear of “...becoming entangled in the larger political, social and religious questions surrounding the violence in Northern Ireland, or of being accused of trivialising it by using it as material for popular fiction.” (Connolly, p.51)

In this chapter, I wish to explore novels by two Irish writers who were among the first to write about the violence in Northern Ireland in their work, Bernard McClaerty and Brian Moore. McClaerty’s 1983 novel, *Cal*, straddles the border between literary and crime fiction, and is referred to as the first novel of note to be set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. For his part, Moore, known as a writer who effortlessly moves between writing literary and crime fiction, gives us an honest and often hard-hitting account of the violence across the border in his 1990 novel, *Lies of Silence*. Thematically these novels, may be grouped with a number of subsequent Irish novels produced in the 1990’s to create a sub-genre that could be referred to as political fiction, which sits somewhere between literary and crime fiction, and is certainly the precursor to today’s popular Irish crime novel. Irish political fiction, as I have referred to it, is fiction that deals with the atrocities of civil war during the period known historically as “The Troubles” and the affects that political unrest had on Irish citizens both north and south of the border during this time.

²⁷ John Connolly, ‘No Blacks, No Dogs, No Crime Writers: Ireland and the Mystery Genre’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 51. Henceforth Connolly.

Cal follows the life of a young Catholic man living in Belfast during the height of political unrest. McClaverty paints a grim picture of an unnamed rural town in mid-Ulster where young Catholic men like Cal are victims not only of the high unemployment rate, but also of the Protestant extremists who wish to rid their town of the few remaining Catholics by means of intimidation.

Cal and his father are the only Catholic family to remain living in their housing estate, and because of this Cal feels unsafe in the neighbourhood. At the beginning of the novel we are told that ‘as [Cal] turned into his street he felt the eyes on him.’²⁸ He keeps his eyes fixed on the ground to avoid seeing the twitching curtains of the neighbours, or worse still the Union Jack flags, which have been flying in celebration of the Twelfth of July, and continue to do so despite the passing of the celebration. But Cal is accosted, even with eyes averted, by the kerbs, which have been painted red, white and blue – a pointed gesture he feels towards he and his father, as the last remaining Catholics on the estate. Cal’s father, we are told, is stubborn, stating “No Loyalist bastard is going to force me out of my own home. They can kill me first.” (McClaverty, p.9) His words almost come to fruition when later in the novel the McCluskeys’ house is targeted by a group of youths who throw a petrol bomb through the door burning the house to the ground and leaving Cal and his father destitute.

Displacement was a huge problem for many Catholic and some Protestant families during the peak of the Troubles in the 1970s. In 1974, a community relations report suggested that between August 1969 and February 1973 “8,180 families were forced to evacuate their houses in the Greater Belfast area, 80% estimated to be Catholic, and by 1973, 23 out of 30 Catholic-owned bars in North Belfast had been bombed by Loyalists.”²⁹ It was no fiction that families such as the McCluskeys became a part of this displacement epidemic during that troubled period.

In fact housing conditions in 1970s Northern Ireland were reportedly dire for both Catholics and Loyalists. “Derry was the worst black spot in the region as regards children in low-income, single-parent families and overcrowding.” (Ferriter, p.630) Many families lived in ghettos, the worst being Short Strand in Belfast, described as “a republican hinterland” where the population was said to have decreased from “8000 to [just] 2,500 in six years with 54 in jail on internment charges.” (Ferriter,

²⁸ Bernard McClaverty, *Cal* (UK: Penguin, 1983), p. 8. Henceforth McClaverty.

²⁹ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 626. Henceforth Ferriter.

p.630) *Cal*, although set in a rural area, depicts a no-less grim landscape, which writer Adrian McKinty describes as a “boggy Nowhereland that was 1970s Ireland.”³⁰

Cal’s fear of their unionist neighbours proves to be all too real when he is set upon one night by a gang of youths whilst walking home. Barring his way, the biggest one asks, “When are you getting out to let somebody decent into that house?” When Cal replies that they’re not, the youth calls him a “Fenian bastard” and lunges at him. (McClaverty, p.46) The three proceed to beat Cal, and he tries to defend himself, eventually escaping to jump a hedge and cut across the fields home, with their threats “we’ll get you next time” echoing in his ears. (McClaverty, p.46) By 1969, such intercommunal violence in Northern communities had become an everyday occurrence, which left Catholic families such as the McCluskeys extremely vulnerable to loyalist attacks. By this time “republicans had maintained that the Northern state was irretrievably sectarian, that non-violent attempts at reform were futile, and that the IRA was needed both to defend Catholic communities and to end the existence of this corrupt and artificial polity.”³¹ Defence and the destruction of “a Northern Ireland state which they considered to be beyond reform or repair” (English, p.371) became the two main objectives of the Provisional IRA, which was formed in December 1969.

In the politics of the Provisional IRA lay a deep sense of community. It was, according to Richard English, “a politics of urgent self-protection as a community: the impulsion behind the split in the IRA which produced the Provisionals was the intercommunal violence of the North, and in particular the loyalist attacks on some working-class Catholic areas in 1969.” (English, p.371) The Provisionals “represented a politics firmly based in daily ties to actual people” (English, p.371) as opposed to simply an imagined community.

This sense of community can be seen in *Cal* as represented by the dissident group in which Cal’s old school friend Crilly plays an important role. Unfortunately, for these dissidents, loyalty to the cause comes before any personal loyalty. Cal lives in fear of Crilly who refuses to hear Cal’s protests that he wants out of the movement, even though, as he says, he never agreed to be ‘in’. Cal lives constantly with the guilt of having been accessory to the sectarian killing of an RUC officer at the hands of

³⁰ Adrian McKinty, “Odd Men Out”, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 99. Henceforth McKinty.

³¹ Richard English, *Irish Freedom* (London: McMillan, 2006), p. 371. Henceforth English.

Crilly. Driver of the getaway car, Cal witnessed the killing of the officer “on his own doorstep” (McClaverty, p.22) and it is after this cold-blooded murder that he decides that he wants no part in further such horrific crimes. Skeffington, the leader of this dissident group tells Cal that “...[they] have to make sacrifices...[he] can’t just turn away and say [he] hasn’t got the stomach for it.” (McClaverty, p.23) Later when Cal continues to say that he no longer wants to be involved, Skeffington tells him in no uncertain terms “...That creates a big problem Cahal. It would be out of my hands. I wouldn’t like to see you hurt.” (McClaverty, p.40) Cal knows that Skeffington’s threats are real, that they shoot deserters – even “deserters who protested that they had never joined in the first place.” (McClaverty, p.92) He lives in dread of Crilly coming to the house to seek him out for another job.

The Provisional IRA believed that the only way of attaining a united Ireland was by continued armed struggle, which would finally force the British to abandon Northern Ireland. As Richard English explains:

The necessity and practice of violent nationalist struggle were central and distinctive features of their mission. Violence was considered essential to the production of necessary change. More viscerally, it simultaneously met needs for revenge, for hitting back: security force violence and harassment of the Catholic community produced an intensified, rage-filled response, whether against the British army, the RUC or loyalists: there was a strong desire to fight back, when faced with loyalist attacks on Catholics, “There was no way to defend against these things. So the only way to appear to be defending, to appear to be active, was to take out other people.” (English, p.373)

The killing of the RUC officer is an example of the dissidents “fighting back.” For Crilly, the RUC officer is simply a representative of those groups who inflict suffering on the Catholic community and he becomes just another statistic in the number of unnecessary deaths to occur in this troubled period.

The fact that Crilly, Cal’s peer, took the job at the abattoir, where Cal’s father works and which Cal refused to do, is symbolic. The “sweet warm nauseating smell of the place” turns Cal’s stomach. He describes “the crack of the humane killer [that] echoed round the glass roof [and] the queuing beasts that bellowed in the distance” (McClaverty, p.7) sensing their fate, much as the victims of sectarian attacks or even Cal might at the hands of either side of the political divide. Crilly has the stomach to

work at the abattoir, to kill a beast with a captive bolt, just as he pulled the trigger of the gun to kill the RUC man, but Cal has no such tendency towards acts of violence.

At the centre of *Cal* is the love story of he and Marcella, the dead RUC man's wife. When Cal first sees her working in the library where he goes to borrow cassettes, he feels sick with guilt. He hears her name, the name that was the last word he heard on the dying man's lips as he crumpled to his knees on the doorstep the night that Crilly shot him, and he knows that she must be the same woman – Marcella not being a common name. Guilt drives Cal to seek Marcella's company. As he watches her at work in the library, he wants to "...reach out and touch her hand over the counter, to tell her that everything would be all right." (McClaverty, p.16) He is attracted to her, but he knows nothing can come of it because of the part he played in her husband's death. Like the killer drawn back to the crime scene, Cal is drawn to Marcella. He uses the excuse of selling wood from a fallen tree, which his father had him chop up, to visit the Mortons' farm. When he does such a good job at splitting and stacking the wood, Mrs Morton, the mother of the murdered RUC officer offers Cal a job picking potatoes, and he accepts in order to be near Marcella.

In *Cal*, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants living in the same community is explored. On the Mortons' farm Cal works for Cyril Dunlop – a protestant and acquaintance of his father from the town. Despite their opposing religious and political beliefs, the two men get on – Cal says of their relationship "...They would stand for hours on end chatting on the street corner and then Shamie would come home and say 'That Cyril Dunlop was in every Orange march that ever there was. And believe me, Cal, that Orange order is rotten to the core.'" (McClaverty, p.50) When Cal begins to work for Cyril, he mirrors his father's view by saying that he is "affable enough for an Orangeman." (McClaverty, p.56) It is only once in the company of Cal that Cyril Dunlop airs his strong Unionist views, and Cal, although he challenges what the older man says, accepts his beliefs. Dunlop tells Cal that for every policeman or soldier shot he would take two of the IRA prisoners in Long Kesh, "...put two of those bastards up against the wall and blow their brains out." (McClaverty, p.110) When Cal asks Dunlop if he would "do the same to the Loyalist prisoners every time a Catholic was murdered", he responds "Maybe. But it's not the same thing. That's the lunatic fringe. They get mad seeing good men shot down day after day." (McClaverty, p.111) Cal calmly accepts Dunlop's opinion, in a way that Skeffington or Crilly would not, because he knows that the older man is unwavering

in his opinion just as the IRA men are in their goal of obtaining a united Ireland. The McCluskeys' tolerance of Dunlop's politics is not the only example of the ability of Catholics and Protestants to get along together in McClaverty's novel. Marcella, the widow of the RUC man is Catholic and married into a Protestant family. She tells Cal that when they married it was her family that had objections about the union, and not his. When the McCluskeys' house is burned by UVF extremists, one of Shamie's neighbours brings him an overcoat, cries and says, "...it makes [her] ashamed to be a Protestant." (McClaverty, p.75) Likewise, when Dunlop hears about the house being burnt, he tells Cal, "I'll have to admit it, Cal, there's bad bastards on both sides. (McClaverty, p.81)"

The burning of the McCluskeys' house is not unexpected. A note was posted through the letterbox, which read: "Get out you Fenyan scum or we'll burn you out. This is your 2nd warning. There will be no other. UVF." (McClaverty, p.27) "It [is] the idea of people whose faces he [doesn't] know hating him that [makes] Cal's skin crawl. To be hated not for yourself but for what you [are]." (McClaverty, p.27) He knows that the UVF will carry out their threat on a night when he and his father are not expecting it. Cal describes his father's view of the war as being a bit like the Westerns that he liked to watch on television... "that he had right on his side and it was the baddies who would die." (McClaverty, p.27) The reality is too much for his father who becomes depressed, and whose health goes into visible decline after the attack. Cal wonders, "how many people had cracked up like Shamie as a result of the Troubles. Shaking remnants of themselves." (McClaverty, p.113)

The fire gives Cal an opportunity to escape from Skeffington and Crilly who he knows will come asking him to do another job. He tells his father to tell them that he left after the attack and that he doesn't know of his whereabouts. Cal squats in an unoccupied cottage on the grounds of the Morton's farm. And finally when they discover his presence there and he explains about being burnt out of his home, Mrs Morton tells him that he can stay there, proving again the humanity that can exist between religions even in troubled times.

Cal and Marcella become close, but his terrible secret remains an obstacle between them. When they make love he tries to block out the images from the night of the crime, but "in the darkness he [sees] her husband genuflect and the sudden soiling of the wallpaper behind him." (McClaverty, p.138) He knows that as he grows closer to her he is putting himself in danger. His need to confess is overwhelming. He says it is

“the one thing he wanted to talk to her about, to have her console him.” (McClaverty, p.142) But he knows that it is too much to expect from her, and so he keeps quiet, deciding in the end that if he is “lifted” he will write her a letter to tell her the truth.

Finally Cal is found – first by Crilly and Skeffington and then by the police. Skeffington tells Cal that he is a traitor and that the next step is to turn informer. He gives him an opportunity to redeem himself if he will give them the address of the place where he is staying so that they can locate him should they need him – that “the price of getting out is staying in.” (McClaverty, p.149) Cal is saved from having to tell them that he is staying at the Morton’s when the police suddenly arrive to “lift” the IRA men. Cal escapes out the back of the house, but knows that it will not be long before he too is caught for his part in Robert Morton’s death. The next morning when the police come to arrest him, Cal is “grateful that at last someone [is] going to beat him within an inch of his life.” (McClaverty, p.154) He knows that he cannot go on with the death of Marcella’s husband on his conscience, whatever his desire for a united Ireland.

In contrast to the Provisional IRA’s belief in violence as a means of defence, many Catholics in Northern Ireland disagreed with violent nationalism, seeing it as a futile means of achieving unity: “Not all working-class Irish Catholics responded to Bloody Sunday 1972 by joining the Provisionals and killing people; some people saw far earlier than the Provos that violence in Northern Ireland would bring not nationalist victory but futile, bloodstained stalemate.” (English, p.377)

Michael Dillon, the protagonist of Brian Moore’s novel *Lies of Silence*, like Cal, refuses to have the deaths of innocent people on his hands. Catholics living in Belfast, Dillon and his wife, previously apolitical, are forced at gunpoint to become part of a plot to plant a bomb, which could kill hundreds of people, when a group of Provisional IRA youths break into their house and hold them hostage one night.

Dillon, hotel manager of the Clarence Hotel in Belfast is ordered by the men to drive to work and to park his car, in which a bomb has been planted, beneath one of the function rooms in the Hotel where Pottinger, head of the Orange Order is giving a speech. Dillon is faced with a huge moral dilemma, if he does what the IRA wish, hundreds of innocent people could die, and if he doesn’t – if he calls the bomb scare into the police there is the possibility that they will carry out their threat to kill his wife. Failing to depend on the IRA to phone in a warning, and unable to live with the deaths of hundreds on his conscience, Dillon does what he believes is right and

informs the police about the bomb. In doing so, he becomes a traitor to his wife on whom he has also been having an affair.

The plan of Dillon's abducters to bomb the Belfast hotel bears similarity to the all-too-real atrocities of bombings carried out by the Provisional IRA during the 1970's and 1980's. In 1978, the Provos planted an incendiary device in the La Mon Hotel in County Down, near Belfast. In the aftermath of the atrocity, the dissident group apologized, saying that they had been prevented from giving adequate warning because the telephone box from which they had intended making the call had been vandalized, and that they had then been held up at a British army checkpoint. The warning, when it came, was just nine minutes before the bomb detonated, leaving twelve dead and thirty more injured. In 1984, the Provisionals planted a bomb in the Grand Hotel in Brighton. Their target was the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet. This time there was no warning. Thatcher who was in her hotel room at the time escaped the bombing unscathed, but two officials and three official's wives were killed in the attack with dozens more injured. Afterwards, the IRA claimed that Thatcher had been lucky, but that next time that may not be the case.

Moore, who writer Cormac Miller describes as not "transcending the thriller genre...[but bringing] it to a higher level by realising its potential as an art form that reveals hard truths"³² beautifully constructs a parallel between Dillon's private dilemma, his betrayal of his wife Moira, and the political dilemma in which he suddenly finds himself. The hostage incident takes place on the evening that Dillon is set to tell Moira that he is leaving her for another woman. He might have told her before the IRA men had arrived, only a fit of self-loathing from Moira prevented him from doing so. Sensing, perhaps, the news that her husband is about to tell her, Moira begs him not to leave her, despite their differences, and before she turns to sleep, he "kiss[es] her, a traitor's kiss."³³ He refers to her not as "his enemy", but as "his victim" (Moore, p.29) – the victim of his deceit.

It seems that Moira is destined to be a victim. Even before she learns of her husband's affair, she considers that he has betrayed her by jeopardising her life in order to save the strangers at the hotel. It is no wonder then, that in anger, she decides to speak out against their captors. She refuses to be victim to what she considers the

³² Cormac Miller, "The Dead Generations", in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 109. Henceforth Miller

³³ Brian Moore, *Lies of Silence* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 39. Henceforth Moore.

mindless violence and terror that the IRA instils in their victims – Catholics and Protestants alike. With little regard for their lives, it is Moira, even at gunpoint that tells her captors what she thinks of them:

You're just a bunch of crooks, IRA or UDA, Protestants or Catholics, you're all in the same business. Racketeers, the bunch of you. There isn't a building site in this city or a pub that you or the UDA don't hold up for protection money! Military operation, my foot! (Moore, p.61)

After this outburst the IRA man threatens Moira telling her that if she doesn't shut her mouth, he will "shut it for her", but undeterred she continues her attack, saying:

I'll tell you one thing I do know. You're not fighting for anybody's freedom. Not mine, not the people of Northern Ireland's, not anybody's. The only thing you're doing is making people hate each other worse than ever. Maybe that's what you want, isn't it? Because if the Catholics here stop hating the Prods, where would the IRA be? (Moore, p.61)

Moore's novel contains many such statements with regards to politics. For Michael Dillon, the government, particularly that in Westminster, is responsible for the hatred and bigotry that exists between Catholics and Protestants, and therefore for the political violence in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. As Dillon, under capture of the IRA watches an elderly Protestant neighbour leave his house to take his dog for a walk, he observes that "Mr Harbinson, like ninety per cent of the people of Ulster, Catholic and Protestant, just wanted to get on with his life without any interference from men in woollen masks." (Moore, p.62) He notes that Harbinson is not a devout Protestant, just as he is not a devout Catholic, but despite their apolitical preferences, like Cal, they cannot escape the violence wrought of so many lies:

lies told over the years to poor Protestant working people about Catholics, lies told to poor Catholic working people about Protestants, lies from parliaments and pulpits, lies at rallies and funeral orations, and, above all, the lies of silence from those in Westminster who did not want to face the injustices of Ulster's status quo. Angry, [Dillon] stared across the room at the most dangerous victims of these lies, his youthful, ignorant, murderous captors [and wondered]...what new atrocity they [would] work at to keep [the people of Ulster] mired in hate. (Moore, p.69)

Dillon, although he recognises his young captors as victims of political lies, does not excuse their behaviour, no more than Cal excuses Crilly's killing of the RUC Officer. When he is approached by a priest, Fr Matt Connolly, and begged to keep

silent regarding the identity of one of the young men, whose face he saw during his capture, Dillon becomes angry calling the boy – Kev “a vicious little bastard” who deserves to go to prison so that he is deprived of “the chance to kill anybody else.” (Moore, p.207) The priest argues that the boy is only nineteen and is misguided by “romantic notions...Die for Ireland. And all that.” (Moore, p.206) He tells Dillon that the boy is reacting to the injustice that he sees done to Catholics, and is doing so because of what he’s been taught at school. He pleads with Dillon to reconsider testifying as a witness, because if he does this young man, who turns out to be his nephew, will be “locked up in a place like Long Kesh for maybe as long as fifteen years...[a] shocking waste of a young life.” (Moore, p.206) Angered by the priest’s words and his lack of regard for the ordeal that these young men put both he and Moira through, Dillon has little sympathy for the priest’s nephew. Like Moira, he believes that they should be brought to justice.

Moore paints a vivid image of the Belfast landscape throughout the novel – a grey depressing landscape that reflects the war-torn misery of its people. Having spent time in London, Dillon has the impartiality to see “the image the city [has become] to the outside world: graffiti-fouled barricaded slums where the city’s Protestant and Catholic poor confronted each other, year in and year out, in a stasis of hatred, fear and mistrust.” (Moore, p.21) As he drives the route from his house to the hotel with the bomb in the boot of his car he has a renewed awareness of his surroundings. He passes the house where he grew up, then the cinema “where as a boy he had watched films in which men fired revolvers at other men and bombs blew up forts and other buildings, but where, always, in the end, the bad men paid for their crimes.” (Moore, p.81) He passes the Catholic school which he attended as a child, “a school where teaching was carried on by bullying and corporal punishment...a school run by priests whose narrow sectarian views perfectly propagated the divisive bitterness which had led to the events of [the previous] night.” (Moore, p.82) He passes the headquarters of the Orange Order, “that fount of Protestant prejudice against the third of Ulster’s people who are Catholics” and “drives along the edge of the Protestant and Catholic ghettos...the true and lasting legacy...founded on inequality and sectarian hate.” (Moore, p.82) And all the time he is thinking about the bomb in the back of the car and whether it might go off before he reaches his destination.

Dillon knows that he is being followed on his route to the hotel. His world from that moment becomes “a world of men in masks whose true identity could not be

guessed.” When he leaves the hotel to go across to the newsagents as instructed by his captors, he notices a delivery boy, no more than twelve or thirteen, walking behind him. He sees the boy talking to a girl who wears a yellow muffler, a few minutes later as he makes his emergency call to the police from a back room in the newsagents he sees the same girl staring at him through the window. The boy and girl are, he suspects, lookouts for the IRA. After the incident, Dillon becomes suspicious of everyone. When a boy appears at the door of his office, sweating and, “his eyes glazed as though on drugs” (Moore, p.142), he wonders if he is a frightened assassin, one of the youths from the previous night, but it turns out that he is nothing more than a drunk youth from the graduation party in the hotel who turns and runs to vomit in the corridor outside. The fact that Dillon is wanted by the IRA makes every stranger seem a threat.

When Dillon leaves Belfast to go to London, he is able to think more objectively about his predicament. The detectives have arrested a youth by the name of Kevin who they believe is the same ‘Kev’ that was at Dillon’s house that night. At first, sharing Moira’s anger at what they were put through, he decides that he will testify against the youth, but his anger gives way to logic when he considers that his testifying will change nothing in Belfast, all it will do is put his life and the life of Andrea, his girlfriend, at risk:

If he had agreed to co-operate what good would it have done? The IRA would still break into people’s homes, and terrorise them, and use them to help carry out their murder plans...And people, ordinary people, would be sensible and see that their lives were more important than whether Catholics in Northern Ireland were given their fair share of jobs and votes. It did not matter one jot in the history of the world whether Ireland became united. Northern Ireland was not an occupied country like France under the Nazis. The majority of its people wanted it to remain as part of Great Britain. There was no reason to go on risking his life. (Moore, p.232)

Dillon phones Detective Norton to tell him that he is unwilling to testify, but he is unable to make contact with him. In the meantime, however, Fr Matt Connolly pays him another visit, and succeeds not in dissuading him, but instead angers him into deciding to testify after all. He tells the priest that if he doesn’t testify against his nephew, he will be “letting them go free to do more killing.” (Moore, p.245) It is a moral dilemma about which Dillon cannot make up his mind.

Andrea, his girlfriend, finally talks sense into Dillon, telling him that that if he testifies it is like putting out a contract on his life. She guesses, rightly, that Dillon

wants to testify so as not to appear a coward. “Is proving you’re not a coward more important than our lives together?” she asks. (Moore, p.247) It is his love for her that makes him see sense once again, but unfortunately for both of them he is too late in deciding not to testify. Fr Connolly who is involved with the IRA has sent word back that Dillon intends to testify, and Dillon, unsuspecting of an unmasked stranger who claims that he is there to read the gas meter allows his assassins into their apartment. The novel reaches a climax with Dillon’s inevitable death at the hands of the IRA:

“You’re Mr Dillon?”

“Yes.”

The little man whistled, as though calling a dog. “Right, then,” he said.

Two young men came in at the door. They wore jeans, T-shirts, sneakers.

They raised their revolvers. They were not wearing masks. This time, there would be no witnesses. (Moore, p.251)

Like *Cal*, the novel ends on a climactic note – but while Cal’s fate is somewhat inevitable, Dillon’s is more a case of bad luck. Had he been able to contact the detectives to tell them that he did not intend to testify, or had he not been provoked into allowing the priest to believe that he would testify, his death could have been avoided. Instead, Dillon’s life is a sacrifice in a war in which he desired no part. His death will not, as he said, make any difference to the people of Northern Ireland who will continue to be terrorised just as he and his wife were, and lied to by a government responsible for inciting religious hatred.

Dillon’s death at the hands of the Provisional IRA men represents just one in the vast number of Catholics killed by the dissident group during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. His death was intentional, but in reality many Catholics were killed by the group who had initially been set up to defend Catholic communities in the Northern state. In 2000, during a debate about the necessity of an IRA decommissioning of arms, Fintan O’ Toole pointed out that:

The largest number of Republican paramilitaries killed in the conflict were murdered, not by the RUC, or the British army, or the loyalist terror gangs, but by their own comrades. The INLA and the IRA have been responsible for the deaths of 164 of their own members. The British army, RUC, UDR and loyalist paramilitaries killed 161.³⁴

³⁴ *Irish Times*, 5 February 2000.

Lies of Silence, like *Cal* is regarded as a crime novel. At its heart lies a crime of terrible proportions – the intention to kill one man, but whose death would result in a vast number of others. Referred to by writer Adrian McKinty as “a pacy thriller, evocative and literary even as it acknowledges the conventions of the genre” (McKinty, p.101), *Lies of Silence*, is also classed as a literary novel; it was, in fact, nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 1990. For McKinty, “all of Moore’s characters have fully-fledged back stories and motivations and no one does anything until after they have recapitulated their well-thought out – if morally dubious – reasons.” (McKinty, p.102) The same could be said, however, of a lot of contemporary Irish crime fiction novels, whose characters are three-dimensional and who are driven by past experiences – particularly Declan Hughes’s detective *Ed Loy* who I shall look at in the following chapter regarding contemporary crime fiction.

A much-commented on writer when it comes to genre, Moore has been compared to Graham Greene who could “...move between crime fiction and the literary novel, or combine the two within a single book.” (Miller, p.109) Alan Glynn cites Moore as “an interesting case for combatants of the genre wars...a writer who achieved the neat trick of being classified as a literary novelist, but many of whose novels are routinely described as thrillers”³⁵ Speaking about writers such as Moore who escape the label of genre writer, Cormac Miller says, “when literary writers stoop to crime, heavyweight reviewers are usually quick to reassure them that they have transcended the thriller genre by virtue of the artistic beauty of their prose.” (Glynn, p.120) Miller’s point is a legitimate one. It is not uncommon for writers, in the same way in which actors are typecast, to be pigeonholed into writing in a particular genre – once a crime writer, always a crime writer. It must be considered, however, that *Lies of Silence* was written in 1990, a time when the Irish crime fiction novel had not yet come of age. I would argue, that crime writing, per se, has strained against the conventions of the genre and that today’s crime novels are far more literary than their early predecessors. As two cases in point, I will examine, in the following chapter, the novels of Declan Hughes and Declan Burke, writers whose work I consider, not only supreme in terms of crime fiction, but whose style of prose, I would argue, could contend with the best of contemporary Irish literary fiction.

³⁵ Alan Glynn, ‘Murder in Mind: The Irish Literary Crime Novel’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 120. Henceforth Glynn.

Chapter Four: Contemporary Irish Crime Fiction

If the Troubles in Northern Ireland prevented the development of Irish crime fiction in the 1980's, it was the Celtic Tiger of the 1990's that produced the perfect environment for Irish crime fiction not only to come of age, but also to flourish. The Celtic tiger saw a surge in the economic growth of the country, unemployment reached an all time low of below four percent, and Irish emigrants returned from abroad, but there was a flip side to all of this positivity. As the country's economy grew, so too did organised crime. A surge in the demand for illegal drugs created a competitive arena in the drugs trade resulting in gangland warfare and as a result an increase in the number of murders, which have become an almost daily occurrence in the past decade.

For Dennis Porter: "the emergence of private eye crime fiction and the heroic type associated with it depended on a particular historical, socio-economic and cultural conjuncture."³⁶ Hard-boiled crime fiction emerged in the United States in the period following the civil war; "the so-called Gilded Age that laid the foundations of the modern American industrial capitalist system" (Porter, p.95) of the 1920's. It was an age of progress that saw some of the most renowned inventions incorporated into everyday living: "electricity, the wireless, the telephone, the automobile and, of course, moving pictures." (Porter, p.98) Irish crime fiction took off at the height of the era known as the Celtic Tiger – a period of huge economic growth which took place between 1995 and 2008. Prior to and during this period important political changes also took place. In 1994 the IRA declared a ceasefire, which lasted seventeen months. This ceasefire collapsed due to the failure of the British government to negotiate in talks with Sinn Fein. However, it was renewed in 1997, and in 1998 the Good Friday agreement was signed, a major political development in the Northern Ireland peace process. Between 1995 and 2000 the Irish economy expanded at a rate of 9.4%, and it continued to grow at a rate of 5.9% until 2008 when it fell into recession. This period is associated with high employment rates, a boom in the construction industry, and low tax rates, which led to increased foreign investment in Ireland.

For Irish writers the Celtic Tiger together with its dark underbelly provided the perfect environment in which to produce crime fiction. Declan Hughes describes how

³⁶ Denis Porter, 'The Private Eye', in Martin Priestman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 95. Henceforth Porter.

prior to the Celtic Tiger he had been waiting for the right moment to produce his series of detective novels: “For a while, I felt like someone with a guitar in the 1950s, waiting for rock and roll to break out. I knew it must be possible to write hard-boiled crime fiction set in Ireland. I just wasn’t sure Ireland knew about it yet.”³⁷ Ireland’s long tradition of literary fiction shows a nation whose “realist” writing tends to reflect the society and the time period in which it is written. Just as literary fiction writers such as John McGahern and Edna O’Brien depict an accurate image of rural Ireland during the 1960s, today’s crime writers portray an equally realistic vision of urban Dublin where wealth and power co-exist, and where underworld criminals become businessmen. Raymond Chandler once said:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels... It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in...³⁸

In a similar vein, Gene Kerrigan notes that:

Crime is often a distorted version of the behaviour held in high regard within a society. Ambitious and able people who never learned the skills of capitalist buccaneering become ghetto entrepreneurs. They source and distribute an illegal product – and as they prosper they pick up the business skills they need... Limited their lives may be, but some are tougher, brighter and ultimately more successful than the idiots in the Financial Centre to whom they sell cocaine.³⁹

Unlike its classical counterpart, hard-boiled crime fiction is seen to be a product of the city, “a consequence of urbanisation and the concomitant proximity of rich and poor within the confines of urban spaces.”⁴⁰ This can be seen in Declan Hughes’s 2006 debut crime novel *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, which was written when the Celtic Tiger was still roaring, and the construction industry in Ireland was at its peak. Set in the fictitious locations of *Seafield* and *Castlehill*, thinly-veiled variations on South Dublin’s prosperous towns Dun Laoghaire and Dalkey, the characters that inhabit *The*

³⁷ Declan Hughes, ‘Irish Hard-Boiled Crime: A 51st State of Mind’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 167.

³⁸ Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’ (USA: 1994), reprinted in Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story*. Henceforth Chandler.

³⁹ Gene Kerrigan, ‘Brutal, Harrowing, and Devastating’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 261.

⁴⁰ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 2. Henceforth Worthington.

Wrong Kind of Blood are Ireland's new rich, working-class people who have "come from nothing and made it to the top."⁴¹

When Ed Loy, private detective, returns from Los Angeles to bury his mother, he finds that every person he meets is keen to tell him about Ireland's property boom, and how house prices have doubled within the space of five years. Describing his return home, Loy says,

I had barely been forty-eight hours in Dublin, and quite a few of those hours had been spent either in the funeral home or in the church, but Linda must've been the fifteenth person to reassure me about the vibrancy of the local property market. It was like being trapped at an estate agent's convention. Everyone took care not to appear too triumphalist; the boom was spoken of as an unbidden but welcome blessing, like the recent stretch of unexpectedly good weather. But boasting was boasting, however you tried to dress it up. (Hughes, p.11)

On the day of his mother's funeral, Linda Dawson, an old friend of Loy's asks him to find her husband who has disappeared. Linda's husband, Peter is the son of John Dawson, one of the city's biggest property developers. The Dawsons, like most of the characters in Hughes's novel hail from a working-class housing estate called Fagan's Villas, a place which, since their new-earned wealth and their elevation to Castlehill, they are loath to be reminded of, but as Loy investigates the case it seems that "it all goes back to Fagan's Villas" (Hughes, p.180), and that no matter far you go, it is impossible to escape the past.

Returning to Dublin after an absence of twenty years, Loy finds the city a much-changed place. He describes his view from the plane as it comes in to Dublin airport, saying that, "it wasn't of the coast or the green fields of North Dublin; it was four great Dawson cranes suspended above a vast oval construction site." (Hughes, p.11) Likewise, when he returns to his mother's house in Quarryfields, a place which he describes as not being "much of a neighbourhood" when he was growing up, he finds the neighbourhood almost unrecognisable. Not only have the flats gone, but also Fagan's Villas has prospered with "a four-wheel drive on every inch of kerb." (Hughes, p.15) The city centre has changed, too, it has a "sleek sheen to it, a brash, unapologetic confidence about itself that had been thin on the ground in Ireland twenty years before. It also has a derelict in every doorway." (Hughes, p.29) The

⁴¹ Declan Hughes, *The Wrong Kind of Blood* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 13. Henceforth Hughes.

contrast between the “sleek sheen” and the “derelict” marks the two sides of the Celtic Tiger boom - business has prospered, but so, too has the drugs trade and drug-related crime, which is seen as another type of business.

The growth of cities has, historically, been associated with an increase in crime, not only because of the relationship between economic growth and corruption, but also due to the increased population in cities and the anonymity that this lends the criminal. As Heather Worthington points out:

The growth of cities was consequent, in the Western world, on the rise of industry mercantilism, particularly from the 1800’s and onwards. Factories, ports and mills required large numbers of employees and so were located where possible in areas of high population, while the employment they offered attracted more people to those areas...in small villages or parishes within towns criminality was visible; the criminal was either literally observed in the act of the crime or his/her criminality was evident in unusual behaviour or strange demeanour.
(Worthington, p.3)

The city, therefore, is seen as a place that shelters the criminal; “the physicality of the city, the very denseness of the mass of buildings, the miles of roads and streets, the urban sprawl” (Worthington, p.3) all help to protect the identity of the criminal, and sometimes the evidence of the actual crime. The network of streets, the twists and turns and dark alleyways of the city could be said to mirror the intricate plot of the crime novel with its false leads, dead ends and nurturing of suspense.

At the heart of Loy’s case, is the Halligan gang, originally from the famed Somerton flats and who are known to be involved in the drugs trade. The first Loy hears of the Halligans on his return is from his childhood friend Tommy Owens, who admits that he has been working for the Halligans delivering drugs. Tommy says, “Anyway, the drugs, it’s all just a business thing. I mean, if people wanna take Coke or E or whatever, they do, middle-class people – whoever, it’s supply and demand, it’s no different from working in the, in the drinks industry.” (Hughes, p.19) Loy tells him that the difference is that “people working in the drinks industry don’t get maimed and murdered as a matter of course” showing that most of Ireland’s crime is drug-related. (Hughes, p.19)

Ed Loy, who has been working as a private detective in Los Angeles, is modelled on the hard-boiled detectives of Hughes’s writing heroes Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The name ‘Loy’ is in fact a nod to Chandler’s famous character Sam Spade, of whose naming Dennis Porter commented: “The choice of [the name]

Spade itself clearly signals that a character who shares his name with a common tool, and with a proverbial honest tool at that, is a man of the people destined to speak the truth as he sees it, plainly and clearly.” (Porter, p.100) Loy is the common man, and is, therefore, well placed to investigate crimes in his hometown having grown up with the working-class villains of the story, the Halligans, as well as with Detective Inspector Dave Donnelly. For Dennis Porter, the private investigator “is held up to be the stubbornly democratic hero of a post-heroic age, righting wrongs in a fallen urban world in which the traditional institutions and guardians of the law, whether out of incompetence; cynicism or corruption, are no longer up to the task.” (Porter, p.97) Dave Donnelly’s revelation that the police often turn a blind eye to drug dealers such as the Halligans in order to keep the peace qualifies Porter’s idea of the role of the private detective.

When Loy discusses with his friend Donnelly his fear that the Halligans may have been involved in the disappearance of Peter Dawson, Dave tells him that Dawson’s connection with the Halligans is a business one, that “the Halligans have run Dawson’s site security for years. All above board.” (Hughes, p.83) An incredulous Loy enquires whether the Halligans have gone legitimate, to which Donnelly responds, “Not exactly. But they’ve businesses that are. Every cent of drug money they bring in gets laundered so quickly – rental apartments, taxis, a hairdresser’s, a pub – even the Criminal Assets Bureau weren’t able to touch George Halligan.” (Hughes, p.83) Donnelly reveals how the police prefer to ignore drug dealers such as the Halligans as a means of not controlling but containing the drugs arena. He explains to Loy what happened when the National Drug Unit decided to step in to put an end to drug-related crime:

the NDU barged in, zero tolerance, let’s get the drugs off the streets’...so a couple of dealers do two or three years, they get Podge [Halligan] sent down for five years on possession of firearms, and what happens? Headbangers from all over the city see a gap in the market, come here sniffing out the Halligans’ patch...Result? Total mayhem. Fifteen killings in two years...When Podge gets out he sorts the whole thing...until we get the resources – and the laws- to sort the drug problem, we just have to handle it. Which means turning a lot of blind eyes. (Hughes, p.83)

Donnelly’s description of how the police handle drug-related crime certainly raises questions about the law and how it is enforced. Gangland and retaliation killings in the last ten years in Ireland have been numerous. Each killing brings about

repercussions, and the crime bosses do the police a favour by eliminating one another. Unfortunately, for every dealer who is killed, another rises in the ranks to take his place.

George Halligan, known scoundrel-turned-business-man, tells Loy how his legitimate businesses are now making him more money than his criminal dealings, and how it's "time to phase out otherwise," (Hughes, p.203) but there is a conflict of interest between he and his brother Podge, known-psychopath cum drug dealer, who is selling drugs to the middle-class residents of Bayview and Castlehill, particularly when amongst Podge's clientele are prominent members of society such as property developers and town councillors.

Loy discovers a world of drug abuse and corruption amongst Ireland's middle-classes, where councillors are bribed by developers to allow re-zoning of land. In an attempt to persuade one town councillor, Joseph Williamson to change his mind about opposing a re-zoning proposal, the Halligans begin supplying the councillor with free smack. When this does nothing, however, to change Williamson's mind, Podge Halligan purposefully gives the councillor a double dose of the drug, causing him to overdose, and thereby getting him out of the way. Williamson is one in a minority of councillors who cannot be bribed, and for that he is killed. Speculating as to whether or not Williamson may have been corrupt, Dave Donnelly expresses his scepticism saying, "I'm not saying councillors aren't bent, but there's been so much scandal recently about money changing hands in return for votes and tribunals investigating planning corruption that councillors all over Dublin are running for cover. I'd be surprised if they were taking major backhanders in Seafield." (Hughes, p.85) Donnelly's statement reflects a period in which many tribunal investigations took place enquiring into the honesty of prominent politicians in power during the years of the Celtic Tiger.

When Williamson is killed, the newspapers refer to the affluence of the Bayview area, describing it as the "Top People's Seaside suburb, where the luxury homes of top Irish rock stars, film directors, barristers and CEOs formed the exclusive enclave," (Hughes, p.118) Bayview is dubbed by the media as "Bel Eire." It is ironic that amongst the true rich of society resides George and Podge Halligan from the Somerton flats, and also the Dawsons, particularly Barbara Dawson, John Dawson's wife who Loy describes as talking in a "grawnd Dublin-on-its-best-behaviour accent", and then slipping occasionally back into her Fagan's Villas accent, cutting her words

and failing to pronounce her T's. When Barbara Dawson pulls a gun on Loy towards the end of the novel, he says that she speaks "in an accent broader than [he'd] heard [her] use before", stating that "...maybe she didn't feel the need to disguise it when she was carrying a gun." (Hughes, p.315)

Admiring the work of Dashiell Hammet, Raymond Chandler once said that "he put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language customarily used for these purposes." (Chandler) The same can be said of the characters that people Declan Hughes's novels. Tommy Owens and the Halligans speak using a natural working-class Dublin vernacular. The characters also use bad language in a way that it is used in everyday speech. Such use of colloquial language in dialogue is an important factor in the "realism" of a text. As Dennis Porter says of American crime fiction: "private eye stories share much of their material with American literary realism – an American realism, moreover, that since Mark Twain involved 'telling it like it is' by means of spoken language ordinary people themselves used to communicate their experience of the world." (Porter, p.97)

In true hard-boiled fashion, *The Wrong Kind of Blood* ends with a 'big reveal' moment where Loy persuades the Dawsons to admit to the crimes that they committed many years before "all going back to Fagan's villas." He solves the case by discovering that Barbara Dawson is the person responsible for killing her son Peter. In the hard-boiled tradition the number of dead emerge throughout the course of the novel, one of them being Ed Loy's father connecting him personally with the case on which he is working. He puts the ghost of his father to rest when he discovers that rather than walking out on he and his mother as he suspected for so many years, Eamon Loy was murdered by John Dawson who was having an affair with his mother. Hughes depicts a world where murder is committed first for love and then for greed. It is an unsavoury world, as Chandler says, but one, which, in its depiction, reflects the Celtic Tiger years very precisely.

Whilst Hughes novels are written during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger, in contrast Declan Burke's novel *Absolute Zero Cool* is set in the post-Celtic Tiger era and discusses the issues that have arisen in Irish society in more recent years. Unlike Hughes's novels, which are written in the hard-boiled tradition, *Absolute Zero Cool* is far more difficult to define in terms of genre. A highly intellectual read, Burke's novel employs the classic structure of a narrative within a narrative. The premise, that of an author who is approached by a character from one of his unfinished novels demanding

that he finish the story, echoes Luigi Pirandello's philosophical play *Twelve Characters in Search of an Author*, and also Paul Auster's crime novel *The Glass City*. The character tells the writer that he must finish his novel, that in putting it aside he has left him "in limbo." He tells him "publish or I'm damned."⁴²

The writer is puzzled as to how this person came across his script. In a humorous scene, he phones Jonathan Williams, Declan Burke's previous real-life agent, to enquire as to whether he showed anybody else the Karlsson script. Williams tells him that he wouldn't do that without his permission. Teasing the problem out between them, Williams asks the writer if he used part of that script when he applied for an Arts Council Grant. The writer concedes that he did, but that he didn't get the grant because "comedy crime doesn't qualify." They decide that somebody at the Arts Council must have shown the script to the person who claims to be Karlsson.

Burke makes many references to genre throughout the novel. Most frequently the writer refers to the novel that he is trying to write as a comedy crime novel. When he attempts to modify Karlsson's story, and Karlsson tells him that he is "fucking around and bending it out of shape", the writer responds that he is "bending it into shape" because what the publisher wants is a "conventionally conservative crime novel that adheres to the paradigm of a three-act classical tragedy." (Burke, p.157) Karlsson tells him that he didn't realise it was a crime novel, to which the writer responds, "We're blowing up a hospital, Billy", suggesting that every novel which features a crime could be classed as a crime novel.

There are many references to contemporary issues in Ireland throughout the novel, particularly regarding healthcare and the financial crises. Karlsson, who is a hospital porter, has strong opinions regarding the cuts that have been made in the health sector, and the conditions in the hospital where he works. He tells the writer, "Things have got a lot worse since you wrote the first draft. Super-bugs, the two-tier health system, all this...They're misdiagnosing ultra-sounds now, you know that? (Burke, p.40) Karlsson exposes the failures of the health system when he steals classified files from the hospital and makes them public. The files, which he was given to shred, contain information relating to serious incidents of malpractice: a surgical procedure to remove a cancerous testicle where "the wrong testicle was removed"; "a still-born infant buried without its parents consent, which was obtained six hours after the infant

⁴² Declan Burke, *Absolute Zero Cool* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 7.

was interred”, “an emergency room misdiagnosis that confused a three-year-old’s incipient meningitis with the symptoms of a twenty-four-hour flu bug” – this one Karlsson excuses, saying that doctors are only human, and that mistakes are bound to happen when a doctor has been working “thirty-six hours straight” and finally the case of a faulty X-ray machine and the “eighteen months or so it took to detect the fault.” This file alone, he says, has “the potential to bankrupt the Health Service Executive.” (Burke, p.146)

The writer, and Karlsson, or Billy, as he has insisted on being called in the second draft, discuss the state of the economy. The writer tells Billy “So this morning I turn on the radio, *Morning Ireland*, to see what the story is. First thing I hear is Portugal’s up the spout, and some moron’s raving about how we need to burn the bondholders, default now rather than wait until we fall off the cliff.” (Burke, p.49) When Billy responds by saying, “Burn the fuckers to the ground”, the writer tells him that he is “talking like a Shinner”, referring to the Sinn Fein party. (Burke, p.49) The writer has a problem with the script that he is trying to redraft because compared to the reality of what is happening in society, it seems inconsequential:

I’m redrafting a story called *Crime Always Pays*, five or six punters running around scamming a couple of hundred grand off each other. Like, who’s going to give a shit about a couple of hundred grand when the government’s stealing seven billion a year and people are dying on hospital trolleys...See, this is my whole point. It’s not only a farce, it’s beyond bloody parody. You *couldn’t* make it up. (Burke, p.50)

The writer again refers to modern-day living when he explains his concept of democracy. For him, democracy is nothing more than a trick, something that allows people to think that they have the freedom to choose when in fact it is “a blizzard of options so thick it obscures the fact that there is no choice.” (Burke, p.171) He makes reference to the difficulties involved in buying a home, a problem which has faced people in Ireland since house prices reached their peak during the Celtic tiger, saying that “In Ireland, for historical reasons, democracy’s truth is one man, one mortgage. It is also one woman, one mortgage. Most often, giving the size of the mortgage, it is one woman and a man, one mortgage.” (Burke, p.171) He goes on to say that “The trick of democracy is to incentivise slaves to invest in their slavery, to pay for their own prisons, shackle themselves to bricks and mortar.” (Burke, p.172) Anyone who bought a house during the boom knows that this is true. Mortgage holders are slaves

to the oversized loans, which the banks agreed to lend them, loans that sometimes equated to five times the borrower's salary. Since the beginning of the recession the value of houses has decreased by up to fifty per cent leaving these mortgage holders paying twice the amount of the property's value, or worse again, having suffered a job loss, some property owners have been forced to sell their houses at a fifty per cent loss.

The first hint that Karlsson/Billy is the writer's alter ego is given when the writer threatens to obliterate the character, telling him that he was only ever his avatar, something that he created to "purge all that nasty shit [he] didn't like about [himself]." (Burke, p.63) Karlsson responds by telling the writer that he cannot destroy him unless he destroys himself, that he is his evil genius. The writer sets the script alight but Karlsson lives on. At one point Karlsson asks the writer how he knows that he, Karlsson, is not writing the writer into existence as opposed to the other way round. The writer counteracts this suggestion by saying that if that is Karlsson's opinion, it is because the writer has written him to believe that.

Karlsson's plan to blow up the hospital comes about as the result of an amalgamation of his philosophical ideas. An intellectual, throughout the novel Karlsson makes reference to famous historical figures, philosophers, literary writers and even the bible. He argues the cases of, and "aligns [himself] with Cain, Judas, and Pilate." (Burke, p.112) For him, Cain was not told anything about "not smiting his brother." He was playing a game in which he'd been given no rules. Judas, he says, was simply obeying orders, and was made to suffer "eternal vilification for facilitating his master's desire for suicidal martyrdom", and Pilate "appealed to logic and reason" but was unable to deter the willing martyr. For Karlsson, Cain, Judas, and Pilate are the "truly free men of history" because they lack the need to belong that so many others crave. (Burke, p.112)

The hospital, according to Karlsson, is a place where the non-contributors to society congregate, a place where those who have been maimed by wars and other evils are sent to be taken care of. He says, "people unthinkingly accept that the mark of a civilised society is a desire to protect the weak, the young, the old and the vulnerable." (Burke, p.100) He makes a comparison between the caring society of the twenty-first century and the philosophy of the Spartans, who instead of nurturing the weak, "threw defective babies off a great height into a rocky gorge" because in

Spartan society "...infirmity would not be tolerated." (Burke, p.100) For Karlsson, the idea of the Spartans is a logical one. Nowadays, he says,

We do not cull the non-contributors. We do not let the weak fall prey. We do not castrate the mentally infirm. We do not let the aged die. In time, this will result in a shrinking core of healthy human beings, bounded on one side by ever-weakening youth, and on the other by indefinitely extended old age. The doctors and scientists are composing a suicide note to inform an indifferent universe that a species died out through too much caring. (Burke, p.101)

Despite Karlsson's admiration for the Spartans' philosophy, it is not because of any wish to abolish the defective or non-contributors in society that he decides to blow up the hospital. Instead it is an act of terrorism. He says, "a civilisation defines itself by its buildings" (Burke, p.143), and gives as examples, the pyramids, the Parthenon, and the Coliseum. "If you start taking down their buildings, they're going to sit up and take notice," (Burke, p.143) he says. He explains his choice of the hospital by pointing out that it must be a building of importance, one that represents "the faith and hope that have sustained civilisations down through the ages." (Burke, p.143) Again citing history, he points out that Herostratus chose to destroy a temple. Likewise he has chosen to destroy a building of worth and relevance.

Karlsson sends an anonymous letter to the wife of a patient telling her to sign her husband out of the hospital before the date that the bomb is due to go off. He knows that the woman will inform the hospital about the bomb threat and that an evacuation will be carried out. It is not his "desire to annihilate those who are already suffering" (Burke, p.218), he says, even though we are strongly led to believe that as hospital porter he has had a role to play in assisting the elderly patients in the hospital to die. This, the character later refutes, but Karlsson/the writer is an unreliable narrator who erases facts as he rewrites drafts of his novel.

It is only towards the end of the novel that the dual character of Karlsson and the writer merge. Karlsson, who denied that he had any desire to annihilate those suffering, is again proved to be a liar when we discover that the writer has planned to kill Rosie, his asthmatic baby, in keeping with the Spartans' philosophy to get rid of the defective. When the hospital is evacuated, Rosie is inside. The writer has meticulously planned the evening of the bombing. He takes his wife out for dinner, leaving her parents babysitting. Secretly, he has been blowing cigarette smoke into the baby's lungs, so that she will have breathing difficulties and the grandparents will

have to take her to the hospital. The writer has also planned another murder, that of 'Yasmin', the paedophile whom he met on the Internet posing as a twelve-year-old girl. He tells Yasmin that his laptop with child pornography is in the basement of the hospital and instructs him that to get into the hospital during the evacuation he will have to pose as a doctor. "There will be an elderly couple carrying a baby, it'll have breathing problems. She's your ticket inside" (Burke, p.231) he tells him. 'Yasmin' follows his instructions and taking Rosie from the grandparents, he makes his way to the janitor's closet in the basement not realising that he is about to set off the bomb. The writer/Karlsson has planned two victims of the bombing, the paedophile and his own child.

The writer, arriving at the hospital during the evacuation, suddenly sees the horror of what he has planned, and making his way to the basement attempts to rescue the baby. Miraculously, she has survived the explosion, but the writer has another battle to fight, that between himself and his alter ego Karlsson/Billy. The writer claims to see Karlsson leaning on the baby's chest in an attempt to stifle her breathing. Reacting to this, he says "I hurl myself across Rosie, smash my forehead into his [Karlsson's] face. The impact is hard, cold. A crash, then splintering. When I open my eyes again, Billy is gone. When I open my eyes again, Billy was never there." (Burke, p.232)

The writer wakes in a place that he describes as being similar to a hospital, "the sheets are white, the walls are white, the tiles on the floor are white." We understand that he is in a mental institution. Unfortunately, Billy/Karlsson has not gone. Sitting by the writer's bedside, he flicks through their finished script, and reveals in the story the writer's psychological problem:

So that's pretty much that,' Billy says....'I mean there's a whole section here, the big Poirot reveal when Debs tells the cop...how you worked as a hospital porter to research your book, except you were sick, suffering from male post-partum depression, under pressure with deadlines, couldn't pay the mortgage, all this. Sick as two small hospitals. (Burke, p.235)

This analogy between the writer and the hospital mirrors an earlier conversation between the writer and Karlsson, when Karlsson decides that the hospital is simply a metaphor. "The hospital. It's you. All that wank about sick-building syndrome, it's all about you being sick," (Burke, p.165) he tells the writer. The writer concedes that some of what Karlsson says is true, "The old people he killed off, they were the fucked-up thoughts I was having, y'know, self-harm, overdose, all this. So I sent

Karlsson into the hospital to eradicate them, wipe them out.” (Burke, p.165) At the end of this particular conversation, Karlsson decides that there are too many metaphors. He says:

the hospital is 9/11, okay, I get that. And it’s a totem for a dangerously compassionate society, sure, and a symbol for the building boom that bankrupted the country...seriously, it’s a wonder the thing hasn’t collapsed already under the weight of all these fucking metaphors. (Burke, p.167)

Karlsson’s description is tongue-in-cheek for it is an accurate analysis of the social commentary that is *Absolute Zero Cool*. The writer’s depression stems from the pressure he feels to provide for his wife and child in an increasingly challenging economic climate. Burke’s novel is classed as a crime novel, but it is also a novel of ideas, a comedy, and a work of literary fiction to rival any of the Booker prize-winning novels of the past decade.

Between them both Hughes and Burke have chronicled what we term as the boom and bust years in Irish society. *The Wrong Kind of Blood* and *Absolute Zero Cool*, two very different novels, also demonstrate the broad spectrum that is considered to be the crime fiction genre. I would argue that the quality of the writing by both of these authors, among numerous other Irish crime writers is on a par with that of what we term literary fiction writers. Certainly, Hughes works within the conventions of crime writing, but the quality of his prose cannot be underestimated. Burke works less so under the conventions of crime fiction, yet because, as his fictitious author explains, “they are planning to blow up a hospital”, the novel is thematically classed and marketed as crime fiction.

Returning to the question of genre raised in the opening chapter of this thesis, I would argue that much classification is decided in the name of marketing. Crime has existed in Irish fiction from the gothic novel, throughout twentieth-century Irish theatre, in literary fiction, and in political fiction set during the Troubles. The Celtic Tiger with its concurrent rise in affluence and crime provided the perfect environment in which crime fiction could flourish. It is as Fintan O’ Toole put it, “arguably the nearest thing we have to a realist literature adequate to capturing the nature of our

society.”⁴³ In a past that dismissed genre fiction this is a comment that might have been made of literary fiction alone, but genres are becoming more fluid. Texts, as anti-genre theorists argue, do not belong to one specific genre, but often employ the use of more than one genre, literary fiction such as *The Book of Evidence* employs the use of crime fiction, just as *Absolute Zero Cool* works in the literary tradition. Genres will always exist for the purposes of classification and marketing, but much of Irish crime fiction has become so much more than simply genre fiction.

⁴³ Fintan O’ Toole, ‘Afterword: From Chandler and the ~Playboy to the Contemporary Crime Wave’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2011), p. 358.

Conclusion

In the critical section of this thesis I explore the evolution of Irish crime fiction from its presence in literary fiction through to what is now considered a crime-writing genre.

In chapter one I examine the concept of genre, presenting the ideas of both pro and anti-genre theorists from Aristotle to Derrida and more recently to Frow in order to introduce the idea of genre, and to show how texts do not belong to one genre in particular but instead may apply the use of several genres.

To substantiate this theory, I examine, in chapter two, two literary novels, *The Butcher Boy* and *The Book of Evidence*, both literary novels that contain elements of the crime genre. In this chapter I look at the concept of cultural materialism and how crime fiction, once dismissed by academics as something lowbrow and unworthy of critical theory, began to be regarded as a tool with which to examine the political and economic ideals of modern society. I chose *The Butcher Boy* as a key text because set in Ireland in the 1960's the novel reflects many of the social issues of the era – including Ireland's post-colonial identity crisis and the class hierarchy that emerged in the neo-colonial state, the growing problem of alcoholism in the country, and the abuse that victims suffered at the hands of religious officials in industrial schools and orphanages. Written in the 1990's, hindsight allows McCabe the knowledge to write about issues pertinent to the time. *The Book of Evidence*, I chose, as it is based loosely on a real-life crime, which happened in Ireland in 1982. Again, a book with murder as its central theme, the novel examines the psychological state of the protagonist, Montgomery in the aftermath of the crime. Both novels while considered literary contain elements of genre fiction, primarily the crime genre.

One of the main questions that I raise is why Irish crime fiction took so long to come of age. Many writers cite Ireland's turbulent political past as the reason for this delay, saying that Irish writers were only too aware of the sensitivity of the issue, and that as both John Connolly and Declan Hughes point out, it would be difficult to write about common-or-garden crimes when across the border both policemen and innocent civilians were being killed on an everyday basis as a result of the political unrest in the North. The two novels which I chose to write about in this chapter *Cal* by Bernard McClaverty and *Lies of Silence* by Brian Moore are the most impressive novels set in the period of the Troubles – *Cal* is seen by many as the first novel of note set during this turbulent period, while *Lies of Silence* provides us with a hard-hitting, yet honest

portrayal of political violence without sensationalising it. Both novels are considered to be crime fiction, but both McClaverty and Moore are also thought of as literary writers. *Lies of Silence* was, in fact, nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 1990. Moore has been compared to Graham Green in his ability to move with ease between crime and literary writing.

In the final chapter of this thesis I examine the work of two of the finest contemporary Irish crime writers, Declan Hughes and Declan Burke. Declan Hughes's novel *The Wrong Kind of Blood* is the first in his series of detective novels featuring the hard-boiled crime detective Ed Loy. Hughes who, of his own admission, is indebted to such great American crime writers as Raymond Chandler and Ross McDonald, very successfully imports the hard-boiled crime novel to an urban Irish setting and makes it his own. *The Wrong Kind of Blood* is set in South Dublin during the peak of what is known as the Celtic Tiger, a period of great economic growth, but one that also coincided with a rise in drug-related crime. The novel comments on many notable aspects of Celtic Tiger Ireland, including the property boom, corrupt politicians and the rise of the common-or-garden criminal to the status of 'businessman.' In contrast, Declan Burke's novel *Absolute Zero Cool* is set in the post-Celtic Tiger era where the emphasis has shifted from the country's great wealth to the shortcomings of the government in the wake of the recession. The novel constantly refers to the issues that currently plague the country, most notably the financial crisis and the shortcomings of the healthcare system. Burke also refers to genre during the novel, stating that the novel within a novel, which his fictitious author is writing, is a crime novel because of its theme, that of a hospital porter who intends blowing up a hospital. Burke's reference to genre and his suggestion that because his novel contains a crime, it is to be classed as a crime novel, returns us to the original question of what constitutes a genre novel? Here I am in agreement not only with Alan Glynn, but also with the anti-genre theorists. The six novels, which I have examined in exploring the evolution of Irish crime fiction employ the use of more than one genre. Whilst the novels in chapter two are classified as literary fiction, they contain two of the most abominable crimes in literary history. The Northern Irish novels are classed as both literary and crime, whilst the contemporary crime novels explored in the final chapter contain the stylistic characteristics of literary crime, such as depth of characterisation and poetic use of language. The question of differentiating crime fiction from literary fiction by means of the quality of the prose

is no longer a valid one given that there exists so many skilfully and beautifully written crime novels.

My novel, *Dark Room*, does not simply belong to one genre. Like the novels examined in this dissertation, it employs the use of both literary and crime genres. Writing *Dark Room* brought about the question of genre as I was unsure how to classify my novel when asked what type of book it was. It was this, which prompted me to write a dissertation on the evolution of Irish crime fiction as I believe that although a literary novel, my work could easily be marketed as crime fiction. It fits, I have been told by leading agent Darley Anderson, into the category of “Literary Thriller”, which agents say is a growing genre in today’s market.

Having explored the six novels in this dissertation in terms of cultural materialism, it is important to note that what inspired *Dark Room* is the alarming number of domestic murders, which have taken place in Ireland in the past decade. Since 1996, according to statistics released by Women’s Aid in December 2012, 179 women had, at that time, been murdered. Of those cases resolved, the victim’s husband was charged with the murder in 53% of cases, with a further 47 of those murders being committed by someone known to the victim – in 99% of the cases resolved, the murderer was male. Domestic murders happen for many reasons, most often when women attempt to end previously abusive relationships, but some for more calculated reasons. In 2008, in a high-profile murder case, murderer Joe O’ Reilly was sent to prison for the killing of his wife, Rachel. O’ Reilly had intended leaving his wife, but knew that he would be unlikely to get custody of their two children if he did so – and so he staged a burglary in their home, and murdered his wife in an attempt to gain custody of their children.

Oliver Molloy, the protagonist of *Dark Room* is not a sociopath like Francie Brady or Freddie Montgomery. The killing of Mercedes is a crime of passion, something that he wishes had never occurred, but he spends the duration of the novel trying to cover his tracks knowing that eventually he will be questioned about his wife’s disappearance.

Reading crime fiction novels in preparation to write a thesis on the evolution of Irish crime fiction helped me to understand that novels may employ the use of more than one genre. It also helped in relation to both plotting and setting when I was writing *Dark Room*. Examining the six novels in terms of cultural materialism taught me how literature can be used to respond to topical issues in contemporary society,

and to reveal the ideologies of that society. It also gives the novels a sense of time and place, which I feel I may utilise further in my own creative work.

In the writing of this dissertation I was forced to omit, due to the constraints of word limit and time, a number of very talented Irish crime writers. The aforementioned Alan Glynn is a remarkable writer whose novel *Winterland* received worthy praise, referred to by John Connolly as “both a crime novel and a portrait of contemporary Ireland caught at a moment of profound change...” and by Ken Bruen as “a noir masterpiece.” Likewise, *The Twelve* by Stuart Neville is an extremely gripping crime novel set in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Again, like the novels analysed in this dissertation, it reflects current issues in Irish society – its plot revolves around a vendetta, which threatens to destabilise Northern Ireland’s peace process.

It is important, too, to mention the number of up-and-coming female Irish crime writers who have in the past five years enjoyed phenomenal success. These include Arlene Hunt, Jane Casey and Tana French whose debut novel *In the Woods* won a number of awards, including the Edgar award for best crime novel.

Because of the nature of the thesis it was also necessary to leave out those Irish crime writers who set their novels abroad – in particular John Connolly whom I have cited many times throughout this dissertation in relation to the emergence and popularity of the Irish crime novel. Connolly, who set his first novel *Every Dead Thing* in the States, says that he did so in order to escape the label of being an Irish writer. He claims that if he’d set the novel in Ireland, it may well have been classed as an Irish as opposed to a crime novel. His point is an interesting one in relation to marketing and genre.

With regards to the future of Irish crime writing I will leave the last words to the aforementioned John Connolly who says:

The challenge facing Irish crime writing, if it is to find its place on the international stage, is how to create a uniquely Irish form of the genre without losing sight of the Universal, how to explore all that is contemporary while remaining in touch with the past, and how to ensure that it is, at last, the start of a new and permanent tradition in Irish letters.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ John Connolly, ‘No Blacks, No Dogs, No Crime Writers: Ireland and the Mystery Genre’, in Declan Burke, ed., *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century*, p. 57.

Connolly's contemporaries, Declan Burke, Alan Glynn, and in particular Declan Hughes have already brought Irish crime writing to the international stage. *The Wrong Kind of Blood* is the perfect example of a novel that brings together the past and the present in Irish society – the new rich may enjoy their newfound wealth amongst the homes of Irish rock stars in Bayview and Castlehill – but as Ed Loy says, “it all goes back to Fagan's villas”, and you can never escape the past.

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Self-Refection

In writing my debut novel, *Dark Room*, one question kept raising itself in my mind – the question of genre. As someone with a history of short story writing, I have always written in the literary mode and I had no intention of changing this when I began writing the novel. *Dark Room* started out as a work of literary fiction, but as it evolved I found myself incorporating many elements of crime and suspense, so much so that I began to question the type of novel that I was writing.

Inevitably, when you mention that you are writing a novel, the first question that people ask is “what kind of novel is it?” I began to describe *Dark Room* as “a literary fiction novel with elements of crime.” It was a long and not very satisfactory way of describing it, but it also seemed to me the most apt description that I could give. I was reluctant to call *Dark Room* a crime fiction novel because I felt that the difference between literary and crime fiction was the quality of the prose – this is something which I have changed my opinion about having studied for my dissertation a wide range of contemporary Irish crime fiction novels. I asked my PhD supervisor, Professor Ian Gregson, on completion of the novel how he would describe it, and he referred to *Dark Room* as “a psychological literary thriller.” I then had the good fortune to have my novel read by Arlene Hunt, one of Ireland’s most revered crime writers and posing the same question to her, Arlene responded that *Dark Room* was and most certainly would be marketed as a crime fiction novel. There are many types of novel that are incorporated under the genre of crime fiction – not all are private detective or forensic novels, there are also novels such as *Dark Room*, which rely on suspense as the key factor.

It is not surprising that *Dark Room* evolved in the manner in which it did. It was during the period in which I wrote the novel that I developed a voracious appetite for crime fiction books, of both international and Irish origin. The writer who impressed me most in this genre is Dublin writer, Declan Hughes. Hughes’s debut novel, *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, is a noir detective story set in contemporary Ireland, but it is not what I expected crime fiction to be – namely what John Banville referred to as “pour ecrire sans style” – or “writing without style.” This is how Banville describes the thrillers that he writes under his pseudonym Benjamin Black. Hughes, however, could certainly not be accused of writing without style. His sentences are extremely well-crafted, and his prose as rich as the noir setting of the contemporary Dublin of which he writes. In reading *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, I instantly fell in love with

crime fiction. This was not literary fiction - it was better - this was literary fiction with a plot! I quickly read the five books in Hughes's detective series, and then began to explore other crime fiction novels, firstly going back in time to the hard-boiled detective novels of American writers Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet, and then returning to discover more contemporary Irish crime writers. I loved the fast pace of the crime novel, the clever dialogue, and the richness of the noir setting. In truth, after a strict diet of crime fiction, I found it difficult to return to reading the slower-paced literary fiction.

In the beginning, the idea of writing a novel was a daunting task, albeit an ambition that I had harboured from my introduction to novels as a very young child. The short story is the genre in which I've had the most experience, having had almost thirty short stories published/awarded to date, and on reflection my experience in the short story genre has served me well as an apprenticeship for novel writing. In the short story every word must count, and so I am accustomed to writing very concentrated prose with zero superfluous information. This is one of the strengths, I think, of *Dark Room*. Everything in the novel is relevant. I wrote nothing for the sake of padding.

The concept for *Dark Room* was born ten years ago and the characters of Oliver and Joanna first appeared in a short story that I had broadcast on RTE Radio. I felt that there was more to these characters than that particular story permitted and they continued to resonate with me despite having written a vast number of stories since. I attempted to write a novel about these two protagonists a decade ago, but I was not, at that time, ready to do so. And I am glad now that I gave up my attempts to because it would have been quite a different novel.

In many ways I feel that *Dark Room* wrote itself, and I was simply the intermediary pounding on the keyboard. Perhaps these characters were living in my head for so long that during that decade they wrote their own story. In the beginning, I was concerned about how I was to sustain a story for the duration of almost 90,000 words. It seemed an impossible feat given that the longest prose piece I had written up until that point was a short story of 5,000 words. However, the writing process was much easier than I first anticipated. There is something about returning to the same characters and the same story every day that is comforting. Ideas emerge and the story progresses. The actions become the characters that speak to you. They are not only your best friends; they are versions of you. From deep within the writer's psyche these characters emerge and the writer exists in some form in every one of them.

Roland Barthes spoke of death of the author and yes, perhaps to read a novel as pure fiction it is necessary to remove the author from the equation. A friend of mine, who asked if she could read the first three chapters of *Dark Room* phoned me after reading the first two chapters, and her first comment was “Joanna is you, right?” Somewhat annoyed, I refuted this comment, saying “of course not. This is a work of fiction!” It may bear some similarities to my own life, Joanna’s ideas may reflect some of my own, but if I am Joanna, then I am also Oliver Molloy. I am Mercedes and Carmen Hernandez, I am all of the characters to feature in the novel because this is my creation and the ideas come from some deep, previously untapped part of my psyche. *Dark Room* is an absolute work of fiction, but it is influenced of course from my experiences, and the experiences of those I’ve met along the way.

As with any work of fiction there were a number of decisions I had to make during the writing process. One of the most important ones was point of view. I began *Dark Room* as a first person narrative in the voice of Joanna. I then decided that in order to tell the story I wanted to tell, I would need to use two voices - Joanna’s and Oliver’s - and it was easier to switch between characters using close third-person narrative than first. As a writer it is hugely important to me to be able to write from the point of view of characters who are extremely diverse from me, be it an elderly lady or a young boy. The character of Oliver was extremely enjoyable to write. And, interestingly, despite his philandering and murderous ways, I’ve been told he is a sympathetic character. Personally, Carmen Hernandez is a character whose story I would find very enjoyable to tell. I was tempted to introduce a third point of view in Carmen’s voice, but I felt that to do so would have been to dilute some of the tension within the text.

As regards setting, *Dark Room* was always going to be an urban noir. I had an idea of Dublin caught in the grip of a deep freeze, which coincidentally occurred in the winter of 2010 during which time I was writing the novel. The image of the body in the canal trapped beneath the ice was for me a striking one. And there was something about this frozen noir setting that appealed to me stylistically. I have used some real place names in the novel, areas such as Rathmines and Inchicore are mentioned, these suburban residential areas are all within proximity of the canal and I wanted it to be at the heart of the story. As a literary writer I am very aware of using the senses in order to create a scene. The senses are the avenues through which we perceive the world, and in a work of fiction they help draw the reader into what writer John Gardner

called “The Fictive Dream.” When we read about a femme fatale – we want to see more than just words on a page - we want to be transported to her world – to see her standing in the orange glow of the streetlamp in her spike-heeled red stilettos, to feel the light rain that drenches her soft curls, and to smell the ash from the cigarette that smoulders between her perfectly manicured fingers. It is in this way that I try to create a vision particularly of Carmen Hernandez, who is the ultimate femme fatale of the novel.

I had reservations about the disposal of Mercedes’s body. Initially, I thought Oliver should dispose of the body in as original a way as possible, because there have been many stories involving the dumping/discovery of a body in the Dublin mountains to the extent that it might be considered a cliché. When I considered what a person might do in Oliver’s situation, however, the answer that came to me was that this person would, most likely, take the body to a remote area or wasteland, and so I decided to go with the most realistic solution. The Dublin Mountains is an area where many bodies have turned up over the years. It is a vast landscape where I am sure many missing persons have found their last resting place.

Another decision that I had to make was regarding the language in the novel. Carmen and Mercedes Hernandez are Spanish femme fatales. I don’t know why, but it was necessary for me that these women were not Irish. Perhaps to contrast them with Joanna, and perhaps because I found it difficult to imagine an Irish femme fatale, though I am sure they must exist! As an English language teacher who meets a lot of Spanish people, I considered writing Carmen’s part using typical Spanish inflection, but I decided against it as it may have been quite jarring for the reader, and there was no reason why Carmen could not be a fluent English speaker.

As someone who is used to writing in a very linear way, it was at first easy to become stuck if I did not know what was to happen in the next scene/chapter. I overcame this, however, by moving on to the next chapter in which I did know what was to happen, and then going back to write the previous chapter when the answer came to me. So, in some ways *Dark Room* was not written in the conventional way in which I would write short stories. There were times when I wrote three ‘Oliver’ chapters in a row, and then had to go back and decide what was happening in Joanna’s strand of the plot. The usage of alternate points of view at times caused me problems in this way because I knew that every chapter must contribute to the development of the plot, and during the editing of the novel if I removed an ‘Oliver’

chapter, then I had to either write another to replace it or shift round some of the other chapters in order to maintain the order of the events. I used flash cards during the second draft to decide in what order events should happen, and there were many scenes, which I changed in the sequence whilst re-drafting.

Dialogue was, for me, the most challenging aspect of writing when I began writing short stories. I know many writers who suffer from the same difficulty. It seems strange if we think about it rationally; dialogue is our primary means of communication. We spend most of our time conversing with other people and yet when we try to write a natural-sounding dialogue, it often comes out stilted without the rhythm and cadence of real speech. Some of the best advice I was given regarding writing dialogue came from Irish writer Claire Keegan who said that people do not speak in full sentences, they trail off, they interrupt each other. Often, we do not listen to what the other person is saying, so we misinterpret their meaning. This advice was invaluable, and I paid close attention to it. Writing *Dark Room* was excellent practice at writing dialogue. Dialogue is one of the most important aspects of writing in a novel, it is what drives the plot forward, what reveals the relationships between characters, and tells about personality. It is the one thing in a novel that a reader will never be tempted to skip over, whereas with a long descriptive passage they might well skim through, or indeed skip over it. As you practise dialogue and begin to know your characters more intimately dialogue becomes easier. The characters begin to speak to each other in their own unique voices. Dialogue is also the most effective way to convey conflict. I am very aware that throughout the course of *Dark Room* there are many scenes containing dialogue between two characters. I use this technique to show the tension that exists between characters. There are many such scenes between Joanna and her mother, and also Oliver and Carmen.

I have also used recurring motifs throughout the novel. There are many scenes with people waiting in cars in darkened places. There are conversations overheard rather than relayed directly. Mistaken identity is a recurring theme, which is a key factor in the novel's suspense.

Character, for me, has never been a difficult aspect of writing. Much literary writing is more character than plot driven, and as a writer of short stories the majority of my previous work was character-centred. Plot was something that concerned me. I felt that it didn't come naturally to me, but the opposite was true when I started writing *Dark Room*. The plot came to me episodically, but I didn't struggle with it. If

anything it came to me through the characters. It was their actions that decided what would happen next to push the story forward. We say that there are character-driven and plot-driven novels, and many works of literary fiction are admittedly cases of style over content, but the best novels contain a healthy balance of character and plot. In fact all of the elements of story writing, character, plot, setting, and dialogue must all convene to create a seamless work of fiction.

I had some qualms about the ending of the novel. The resolution of the Mercedes/Carmen plot came about quite naturally. Carmen is an extreme character, so her decision to have plastic surgery in order to achieve her ambition of becoming her sister seemed natural to her way of thinking. Carmen would literally do anything to get her man. The Arnold plot was not so easy to end. I had decided mid-way through the novel that Vince Arnold was not dead, but instead that he and Rachel had plotted to fake his death in order to claim his life insurance and escape the debts that he owed. The fact that Joanna discovers the truth about Vince Arnold and decides to do nothing about it was a big decision for me. It was problematic in that I didn't want Joanna to be a character who reacts to what happens to her rather than someone who takes action. I decided, however, that by possessing the information that she has at the end of the novel, Joanna is in fact empowered. Her decision to allow Vince Arnold to escape is one that she makes in order to shield her mother from any more heartache. In doing so, Joanna inherits the mantle of lies that her mother created in the first place. In life not everything is resolved neatly as they might be in detective novels such as those by Agatha Christie, and so for me *Dark Room* reaches its natural end when Vince Arnold disappears into the night.

Writing *Dark Room* was an incredible experience. It was surprisingly easy, totally enjoyable and was also a wonderful learning experience in the craft of writing. Joanna and Oliver, who started out as two characters in a short story a decade previously, have finally been given the pivotal roles in fiction that I felt they deserved. To have completed a full-length novel is to realise my life's biggest ambition. The next step is, of course, to find a publisher who is as excited about the novel as I am. That is when the real work begins. I feel that the final draft is as close to perfection as I can get it, and that is important in submitting it to a publisher. I have been extremely lucky to have had Arlene Hunt, a top Irish crime writer read *Dark Room*. She has given me very positive feedback and has recommended the novel to her literary agent. I am, at

present, awaiting correspondence from this woman. My next step is to do my utmost to secure an agent, and in turn a publishing deal on the strength of this novel.